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THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

VOL. I.

THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

BY

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'COWARD CONSCIENCE,' 'LAZARUS IN LONDON,' 'WOMEN ARE STRANGE,'

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THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

CHAPTER I.

THE GLADWELLS.

She had been ill all the winter, all the spring, and a long way into the bright summer. In the summer-time, amongst the Welsh hills, and with the big, restless sea before her, and the boisterous sea-breezes to blow more life into her, she came round by slow degrees to her old self, she thought; but this time she had not stepped back to the better, stronger, more natural life as she had hoped—and prayed—that she might do.

It was not to be this season—or at least it was not to be yet. Presently, perhaps, when the heat was less, when the cool nights were longer, when the autumn breeze came round in real earnest, she would be stronger—yes, she was certain of that. That assurance kept her up; she would wait patiently till then, comforted by the unfailing attention of her husband, who was assiduous, kind, and watchful—an untiring helpmate always.

At the great watering-place of Great Storn's Head, North Wales, he and she were as well known as the town-crier, the red-faced white-hatted driver of the Llewellyn coach, the conductor of the music in the great pavilion on the pier—M. Vibert, from the Frivolity Theatre, and once of the Royal Italian Opera, first violin—in fact, as any of the celebrities, aboriginal or otherwise.

Mr. and Mrs. Gladwell had been to Great Storn's Head year after year; they came early and stopped late, with their servants —with poor Mrs. Faremouth. They spent much money in the town; they rented for the season, and beyond the season, the big house at the back of the Head, one of an imposing cluster of houses looking across a stretch of river, and sea, and sandbanks to distant mountain land, sullen and rugged, and frowning in the shadows, purple and lined with strange streaks of green in the sunlight.

'The Gladwells have come to Rossendale'—which was the name of the big house—was significant of the season opening at Great Storn's Head, the Gladwells having taken to this Welsh watering-place as to a place that was close to their hearts. Mrs. Gladwell loved it because it always

brought her health and strength, she said; 'and what pleased his wife pleased him' was the assertion of the easy-going husband. Easy-going he was; at least, he had the credit of being so in the town. He spent money freely, as we have already intimated; no butcher, baker, or greengrocer had ever known him question an account, and he took charge of all the accounts, to save Mrs. Gladwell worry; the servants had seldom seen him out of temper; he had a loud hearty laugh, almost a boisterous laugh, when there was anything to laugh at—an event which did not occur with a too painful frequency at Rossendale. For Rossendale was a melancholy house, almost a house under a spell, as we shall see for ourselves presently.

There was no false pride about James Gladwell. He would as soon spend half

an hour talking to a boatman or to the man who collected the twopences at the pier gates, as waste his time with M. Vibert, or any of the cream of the *Visitors' List* — a journal which came out every Friday, and was, oddly enough, read from cover to cover before being passed on to Mrs. Gladwell, in her patent safety, noiseless-tyred, extra-springed bath-chair, and who perused it as carefully and as critically as her husband. Mr. Gladwell wheeled his invalid wife to the pier-head every morning with his own hands, the lady being too precious a freight to trust to ordinary steerage, and, it must be whispered here, the lady being fretful and nervous and timid, and preferring James Gladwell—'Handsome Jemmy' he had been called in town amongst boon companions, of whom Mrs. Gladwell knew nothing—to be in constant attendance

by the side of her conveyance when it pleased her to seek the sunshine and sea air.

And it is when proceeding along the pier at half-past eleven in the morning that we take up the threads of our strange story. Mrs. Gladwell was tastefully and fashionably attired, but James Gladwell might have been taken for a pilot in his blue serge had it not been for his bright scarf, in which was set a gold pin—a mailed hand holding a large pearl, scored and lined like a globe.

'How hot it is to-day, James!' said the lady languidly, from beneath the friendly shelter of a white sunshade lined with rose-colour.

'Yes, it generally is hot in August,' the husband said, a trifle indistinctly, on account of his favourite briar-wood pipe being stuck between his teeth. It was the one informality he indulged in *en attendance*, and Mrs. Gladwell offered no objection.

The pipe was a compromise — a reward for services rendered — and James Gladwell was a trifle restless without it. He might have gone on strike without it even, and left his wife to the care of the ordinary bath-chair man, for there is no accounting for the actions of a male biped when balked of his tobacco.

'No air stirring. You notice there is no air stirring, James?' she asked, in a peevish, wiry little way.

'The flag over the band-stand looks rather dead-and-alive,' responded James; 'but we shall have a breeze soon.'

'How can you possibly tell?'

'Those white clouds yonder are moving on a bit.'

'Oh, don't bother me, dear, with your white clouds; they're miles and miles away from here,' was the fretful response.

'Yes; but they're drifting in this direction, and the wind will come with them presently.'

'Ah! it is always presently with you,' the wife said satirically.

James made a wry face as he looked away from her to hide his change of expression.

'Yes, it is always presently with me,' he added, almost by way of an echo to her last assertion, and the echo had a satirical ring in it, too, to anyone with a fine ear for such music.

When husband and wife had reached the end of the pier, and a place had been found for the invalid in her chair out of the glare of the sun, and a fair distance away from the blare of the band, where the music could be heard softly, and all the company, as it circled round and round the pier-head

and the distant band-stand, seen to its fullest advantage, the fragile, sallow-faced, youngish woman whom we call Mrs. Gladwell broke into another plaintive strain.

'It's very cold out of the sun,' she said, with a shiver.

'Shall I——'

'No, don't distress yourself any more about me, James; I like it cold, it's a change from the oppressive heat; but you may put my cape across my shoulders, if you will.'

James Gladwell arranged a light cape round the shoulders of his wife, and there were lady visitors who looked on respectfully and admiringly, and thought with what an attentive husband the poor invalid lady had been blessed. Why, their husbands were not attentive at all, were all over the place, climbing the hills, boating, swimming,

and a few of the worst of them—and the Lord forgive such monsters!—smiling and sniggering at strange females on the parade.

'What time did you tell Miss Reeves to come to me, James?' asked Mrs. Gladwell suddenly.

'Half-past twelve.'

'What time is it now?'

'Five minutes to twelve.'

'You are in a great hurry this morning to be relieved from your duties, James. Is there any particular reason for it?'

'I told Billington to keep a machine for me till twenty minutes to one.'

'I thought you bathed before breakfast this morning.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Where did you go this morning so early, then,' Mrs. Gladwell asked, 'banging the

door as you went out, and waking up the whole house with the noise? I had just dosed off after hours and hours of wakefulness, of staring at those odious Venetian blinds, of sobbing and praying and imploring——'

'Imploring?'

'Yes—pardon! Do you think I'm a heathen, and don't know how to pray?' she asked, with a sudden flash of fire in her dark eyes, and a sudden spot of red on either cheek. 'Do you think I can look at the past, the present, the future—oh, my God, the future, James!—with the coolness that you can look at it all—you with your strength and robust health, and utter indifference to that which would kill some men—most men?'

'Hush!'

'I shall not hush,' she said rebelliously.

'We don't want to talk nonsense on the pier, Lavinia,' he said gently, and by way of remonstrance, 'to grow excited over what we can't help, and shouldn't help if we could.'

'I am not so sure of that.'

'I am quite sure.'

Lavinia Gladwell glanced askance at him, and then turned away her head and looked through her long-handled glasses at the crowd of people passing to and fro. It might be as well to change the subject.

'Where did you say you went this morning, dear?' she asked softly, and without turning her head in his direction again.

James Gladwell bit the stem of his pipe hard, either to suppress his vexation at his wife's persistence, or to keep himself from

laughing outright; it was doubtful which, but he answered her frankly enough.

'I did not say where I went, because you wandered suddenly from the subject, darling,' he replied. 'Like yourself, I was restless, for hours before. I thought I would make a noise going out——'

'You did, dear.'

'If I had left the house too quietly you might not have known that I was out, and have been alarmed at discovering my absence. You are so easily alarmed, Lavinia.'

'And you are so distressingly considerate —at times.

'Always, dear, always.'

'I am not uttering one complaint, and God knows I——' She paused, and said in a more ordinary tone: 'Where were you going so early, did you say, James?'

'So early, you call it?'

'It was half-past five.'

'Nonsense.'

'I sat up in bed to see the exact time by the clock upon the mantelshelf.'

'Indeed! I left you fast asleep enough, Lavinia.'

'It was not half-past five, James.'

'Very likely it was not.'

'Didn't you know that?'

'No. I did not notice the time,' he explained. 'But the day was so bright, the air so fresh, that I could not rest.'

'Or let anybody else rest, James,' she added with a sigh. 'And where did you go?'

'I went—— Oh! here is Miss Reeves. Miss Reeves, I leave our fair patient in your charge till luncheon,' he said, raising his hat politely; 'that will be at half-past one precisely. Good-morning, Lavinia, for the present—good-morning.'

And Mr. Gladwell was off and away, proceeding down the pier with light and agile steps. The small, dark eyes of Mrs. Gladwell followed him.

'Miss Reeves,' said the invalid slowly.

'Yes, madam.'

'Remind me at luncheon that I want to ask Mr. Gladwell a question, will you, please?'

Miss Reeves inclined her head, and then took her stand by the side of the bath-chair in which her mistress was ensconced. Mistress and companion were somewhat of a foil to each other. The fresh young face of the new-comer was bright and healthy and handsome, by comparison with the sallow, pinched countenance of the sick woman. And yet Mrs. Gladwell had been handsome too, only a few years ago. She was a woman of thirty-five now, but she

looked several years older this morning, with that fretful outlook from the recesses of the bath-chair.

'I suppose you see already what a striking contrast my husband is to me, Miss Reeves?' Mrs. Gladwell said, still looking after her husband.

'Of course, there is a contrast—now that you are ill.'

'I am always ill. I never get strong. I never shall get strong.'

'Oh, I would not think that if I were you, madam.'

'How can I help thinking of it when every day robs me of some strength, some hope, some faith? I am a sad invalid. I shall die soon. Oh dear! I am sure I shall die,' she wailed, 'and in spite of all that they say—of all the lies they tell me to keep me from giving way.'

Miss Reeves did not know how to reply to this. These were early times in which to grow confidential, to show sympathy, to evince great interest. It was not in her way to respond with alacrity to new faces, new friends—if there were to be any new friends found at Great Storn's Head—to assimilate herself with new surroundings, and glide, as it were, at once into the new groove. Why, it was only yesterday that she was at home with Em—with the mother, who was more of an invalid than this fine lady—with all the romping, rollicking boys and girls who had made home a pleasant and happy place, though poor enough since father died and left them to get their own living in the best way that they could without him—he apart from all the bother of it in a green corner of Tooting Cemetery. 'The best off of the lot of them,'

Em said ; but then Em was not quite as uncomplaining as she who had come out in the world—to make one less !—and was standing by the side of Mrs. Gladwell's chair regarding this new world just a little ruefully, but not giving way at all—oh no, for all the tears that would come into her eyes ! But then the sun was very strong that morning, and Lower Kennington Lane was such a very long distance away ! And everything was different from what she had expected. Well, the way of the world that is ; she had painted too many bright colours in it, that was all !

CHAPTER II.

QUITE ALONE!

While Muriel Reeves was looking out at her new world, and not liking the general aspect of things so very much at first start, the lady in the bath-chair regarded Muriel in her turn critically, thoughtfully, even wonderingly. What could have induced a girl with her beauty, her common-sense, her lightness of heart, to come to Great Storn's Head as companion to a fretful woman? For here was a girl who could have done better for herself almost anywhere else, Mrs. Gladwell considered. Muriel Reeves's refer-

ences had been so very good, her friends, acquaintances, employer, had launched into so many encomiums respecting the good qualities, the good temper, the extra abilities of the young lady, that Mrs. Lavinia Gladwell thought the general body of folk Kennington way were in a conspiracy to get rid of Miss Reeves at any sacrifice of veracity, and that there must be something more—something out of the common—to bring the young lady in her direction, and so long a distance from home.

Mrs. Gladwell was suspicious, but then she was naturally a suspicious woman. She owned that ; it was her affliction, in a way. Her fellow-creatures were not people in whom she could trust. She had seen too much of the seamy side of the world, and met so few folk therein who wore their hearts upon their sleeves. She did not

herself, so why should she think other people more candid than she was? Nobody did, not even her husband, James, for all his bonhomie, his frank manner, his straightforwardness, his generosity—James, who had left the house that very morning at half-past five for no earthly reason that she could make out, unless it was to aggravate her. She hoped that she should not forget to ask James Gladwell again what was the cause of his early departure from home. She had a bad habit of forgetting matters of moment now—she had so many harassing things to disturb her, so many painful, ay, and terrible recollections to oppress her mind—she could not think of everything. That was where Miss Reeves would come in handy—if Miss Reeves were to be trusted. Ah, that was the question—if she were to be trusted! 'Thoroughly trustworthy,' one

of the references, a Kennington tradesman's, had said, in a florid, gushing way, as if that were even possible. The fool! There was nobody thoroughly trustworthy in this world, she was certain. It was not natural.

'Have you been in Wales before, Miss Reeves?' asked Mrs. Gladwell suddenly.

'No, madam,' was the quiet answer.

'Do you think you will like Wales?'

Muriel Reeves thought it was premature to ask such a question, but she was not surprised, and she answered very readily:

'I think I shall.'

'Why?'

'There is beauty in it—the great hills look so grand, the sea is so bright and blue, the——' She paused, and added in a different tone, 'It is a pretty place, this Great Storn's Head.'

'I used to think so, but I am very sick of it now.'

'Indeed!'

'But, then, I am sick of most things,' she continued wearily—'sick of my life, I could say, if life were to be always like this. But I am young, comparatively,' she added, 'and God will not be too hard on me, I dare say.'

'God will do what is best, be sure, madam.'

'Oh, good gracious!' exclaimed Mrs. Gladwell, raising her hands deprecatingly; 'don't tell me, for mercy's sake, that you are a serious woman—really what people call religious! Not that — anything but that. Your references said that you were cheerful — very cheerful — good-tempered, and so forth.'

'And are those traits of character incom-

patible with being serious, or religious?' asked Muriel.

'Generally—always,' she replied. 'I have had one serious companion, a poor creature always whining over her soul, and other people's souls, which did not belong to her, and were no business of hers; and oh! the dreadful time I had of it until she went away. Don't say you are a second edition of that horrible woman.'

'No, Mrs. Gladwell,' with a little half sigh that escaped in spite of her. 'I am not serious, or what the world calls religious. All the better for me if I were.'

'Why?' the other asked curiously, for the second time this morning.

'I should have been more resigned, or content, or something,' Muriel said, with a little confusion apparent.

'Content—with what?'

'With one's lot in life,' said the companion quickly, and with a restless little laugh; 'is it not that with which we are dissatisfied, madam?'

'Ye-es—perhaps it is,' replied the invalid, regarding Miss Reeves critically again; 'and if you put it in that way, I hope you are not a clever young woman — too clever, that is — or too quick. I had a clever person once to assist me, and a dreadful time it was for me whilst she remained in my service. She wrote a little, poor thing.'

'Poor thing, did she?' replied Muriel Reeves drily.

'Anyone who writes a little is a sad trial for an invalid who requires to be amused, Miss Reeves.'

'Yes; that is very possible. It must be very sad to write—a little.'

'I hope you have no scribbling propensities?' said Mrs. Gladwell.

'Oh no! or I shouldn't be here,' was the quick answer, which Mrs. Gladwell did not quite like; indeed, she spent the next few minutes considering it in various ways.

'You have an astonishingly rapid way of replying—crisp, or a little curt even, I might call it. Is that your natural manner?'

'I am afraid it is, Mrs. Gladwell.'

'I don't object to it—much—I think,' she added, somewhat doubtfully. 'Very probably when I get used to it, I shall like it better than I do at present. For I had one companion who was so dreadfully slow, who took so long a time to answer a question, that there were times, really, when I could have thrown something at her; I believe I did once, now that I come to think of it—a hairbrush, which did not hit her, though;

but, oh, dear, dear, she was terribly irritating!'

Muriel Reeves wondered how many companions Mrs. Gladwell had had to put up with—everything she said reminded her mistress of one of the departed rank and file of lady-helps. There had been a long procession of the ignoble army of the incompetent, she was certain already. Ah, well, what did it matter? She would have had the change for awhile, she thought, a little ruefully, and there were other mistresses, other homes, other pursuits to be found; the world was wide enough, and there were heaps of people in it who wanted to be amused, to be helped, to be taken care of, to be befriended even.

But what a strange woman this Mrs. Gladwell was to ask questions! Some people are built that way, and especially

people who are not of active habits, and who have time to think what they shall ask next. And embarrassing questions, too—how they come uppermost! Without a doubt Mrs. Gladwell had a right to ask questions concerning a young woman whom she had not set eyes on before last night—and very sleepy eyes they were then—and who was to be 'one of the family,' almost from that eventful time of her arrival. The advertisement had said 'one of the family,' but Muriel Reeves, looking at things in the half lights that were about her at present, was not quite certain that there would be any great advantage attached to the privilege. Better not to be one of the family, possibly, if the rest of them were like this particular specimen in the bath-chair. And there was evidently one of the family as ill, and fretful, and odd; she had caught a

glimpse of her, and had heard of her also from a maid-servant, who was disposed to be communicative, and whose confidences Muriel had summarily checked.

'Have I mentioned Mrs. Faremouth to you, my sister?—I forget,' said Mrs. Gladwell suddenly.

'No, madam, you have not.'

'You have not seen her?' was the curious inquiry.

'Is she a tall young lady, with fair hair?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Gladwell, surprised; 'you have seen her, then?'

'She opened a door on the first floor and looked out as I passed upstairs last night. A sad-looking lady, I thought.'

'Ah! she is a great invalid; I suppose it runs in the family—germs, or something,' said Mrs. Gladwell languidly. 'Not one of my family is strong, although I am a

giantess in strength—mentally, that is—by comparison with my poor sister.'

'Indeed,' said Muriel, a little ruefully.

Mrs. Gladwell was a keen observer, for she said quickly—

'Not that you will have anything to do with Mrs. Faremouth—that is not your business in any way. I think it is as well to mention this. She will have no right to your services; it will be a concession, a favour on your part to do anything for her, and you are at liberty always to refuse if anyone should ask you to do so. Or to come to me for further instructions,' she added, after a considerable pause.

'If I can help the young lady in any way I shall be only too glad.'

'Thank you, it will not be necessary; I am afraid I shall monopolize most of your time. I am a bit of a fidget, my husband

says,' she remarked, with the faintest of smiles; 'but he is not a patient man himself, always. If men had only to bear what we women bear they would be more considerate possibly, Miss Reeves.'

'Yes, they are impatient at times,' said Muriel thoughtfully, and she was not thinking of Mr. Gladwell, but of someone who was very far away, she imagined.

And that 'someone' was marching along the pier towards her at that very instant; an irony of fate, as she might have termed it somewhat appropriately. He was approaching her, the very man over whose impertinence and eccentricity—nay, even his excitable temper, if you will—she had been brooding for a longer period than she would care to confess.

'I am afraid we shall be late to-day; it is time we began to move in the direction of

home,' said Mrs. Gladwell ; 'my husband is very particular and very punctual, so far as meals are concerned. Most men are, I fancy. Will you just walk by my side? Rest your hand on the side of the chair, which goes almost by itself. That is quite right ; that is very nice—oh, good gracious! you are not going to run, are you?'

'I had no idea the chair went along so easily,' said Muriel, who had been taken off her guard by the patent springs and well-poised wheels.

'It is one of the best make ; a badly-constructed machine would have been the death of me long ago,' was the reply. 'It's all right, Miss Reeves ; we shall get along very comfortably now. What a blinding, blazing sun it is, to be sure—almost unbearable! Oh, dear me, what a dreadful day it is! Don't you agree with me?'

'I think it is a very beautiful day,' said Muriel frankly, almost like a young woman who had opinions of her own on most things, and was not afraid to acknowledge them.

'Ah, if you had only my sense of lassitude—my fear of an utter collapse of the system—my lack of energy and natural strength—my awful weakness, my bodily prostration, you wouldn't call this a beautiful day. You—why, the band is finished! Oh, how late we are! How unfortunate!'

And Mrs. Gladwell seemed almost disposed to burst into tears.

'Unfortunate?' repeated Muriel wonderingly.

'There is such an unseemly crowd, and everybody scrambles so desperately to get off the pier after the band is over that it upsets my nerves to be mixed up with them. Draw me on one side, Miss Reeves, please,'

she adjured, 'and let the rabble pass. Some of them, in their hurry for lunch, would not hesitate to knock me over, the greedy, robust wretches.'

Miss Reeves drew Mrs. Gladwell under the sheltering eaves of a little bazaar that was erected midway on the pier, and the crowd of pleasure-seekers streamed by them, chatting and laughing, perhaps a little eager for lunch, a few of them, especially those who were boarded by the week, and did not intend the hotel or boarding-house proprietor should get too much out of them whilst they had strength to get any victuals in.

'I don't think the company at Great Storn's Head improves,' murmured Mrs. Gladwell; 'when we first came here six years ago, it was more aristocratic, more genteel, and now there is such a dreadful gang of clergymen always strutting up and

down, and I cannot bear clergymen, they are so self-saturated. Pity they cannot stay at home a little more and attend to their churches—and chapels—and so forth. And the people from Liverpool and Manchester—oh! how distressingly vulgar they are, with their money, and loud voices and guffaws and their obtrusive manners. My husband is far too familiar with most of them—and they assume upon it—and come up and ask how I am, although they don't, as a rule, listen to my reply, but stare over my head vacantly. You are fortunate to be alone in a place like this, Miss Reeves—there is peace for you in it—you will not be harassed or annoyed by objectionable acquaintances. Happy woman, you are left to yourself!'

'That may be but very poor company,' said Muriel softly.

'No woman has a depreciative opinion of herself.'

'Perhaps not. But she may not care to be alone. She may be fond of society, glad to see the smiles on the faces of friends, to hear the sound of their voices, and to feel the touch of their outstretched hands.'

'The journey yesterday has been a little too much for you, Miss Reeves—I am sure it has,' said Mrs. Gladwell, in a pensive kind of way. 'London is a long way off, and it will presently be a great pleasure to you to think you are away from all your family, and at rest in your new home.'

'That will never be a pleasure to me,' was the almost too quick reply.

'Not to think that you are hundreds of miles away from everybody?' Mrs. Gladwell said in faint amazement.

'Oh no; I wish they were all here.'

'What a terrible wish!' said Mrs. Gladwell with a visible shudder. 'I should not like you to know anybody in Wales—to have your thoughts distracted by friends, acquaintances, or relatives.'

'I am quite alone, so pray don't be uneasy, madam.'

'Quite alone?'

'Quite. Hundreds of miles away from everybody,' said Muriel with a sigh.

'Yes, that is extremely satisfactory,' replied the mistress; 'why, I would not have had a companion within a radius of two hundred miles for—— Good gracious! Great Heaven! who is this?'

A tall, broad-shouldered young man, with closely-cropped black hair, and large black eyes, and a complexion that was a little lemony, was standing in front of Miss

Reeves, with both hands outstretched, and a grin which extended from ear to ear.

'Muriel—you? I can't be dreaming! It is you!' was his exclamation; 'was ever anything so surprising as this! So lucky!'

'Oliver!' exclaimed Muriel with dancing eyes and a strange shortness of breath. 'Well, I never!'

Then the two shook hands very heartily, and were evidently extremely glad to meet each other.

CHAPTER III.

SOMEWHAT BREEZY.

It is a moot question which was the more surprised of the two women on the pier of Great Storn's Head. The advent of the tall, dark-haired man came like a thunder-clap to both of them, but it brought a new brightness to Muriel Reeves, and a keen, even a bitter sense of disappointment to the sick woman in the bath-chair. One had been inwardly regretting that she was hundreds of miles from kith and kin, and the other had been inwardly rejoicing that that was a nice, isolated condition for her

companion, and lo! here, in the first hour of Muriel Reeves's new 'engagement,' had sprung into life—and into a very obtrusive, self-assertive life indeed, thought Mrs. Gladwell — a big, ungainly, high-shouldered person, with a face like an Italian bravo's, and with a grin like an organ-grinder's of the same nationality. A bravo in a good temper, but an exceedingly objectionable creature, thought Mrs. Gladwell, and who was on sufficiently friendly terms with her companion to address her by her Christian name. And Miss Reeves had actually called the fellow 'Oliver.'

The incongruity of the situation struck Miss Reeves 'all of a heap'—to put it inelegantly but forcibly.

Only a few seconds ago this young person was talking of her isolation—with a quiver or two of regret over it escaping in little

puffs from her dissatisfied heart—and, hey, presto! here she was, shaking hands with an old friend, a somebody who, at one time or another, had possibly been more than a friend, judging by the blushes which were chasing each other over a very tell-tale countenance. Embarrassment followed quickly upon the surprise and pleasure of an unlooked-for recognition, and finally Muriel's face took a shade of consternation as she turned impulsively to her mistress.

'I—I beg pardon, madam,' she said, with a little confusion apparent, 'but this gentleman is—is a friend who I thought was thousands of miles from here—whom I—I—never expected to see again. Mr. Oliver Toope, madam, of the merchant service, a very old friend of my mother's. Mr. Toope, Mrs. Gladwell,' she added, in a formal intro-

ductory kind of manner, which took her mistress's breath completely away.

Oliver Toope raised a black straw hat politely from his head; but Mrs. Gladwell did not respond, not even by the ghost of a bow.

She was simmering with suppressed indignation at the amazing liberty of her companion's introducing a friend to her, without so much as asking permission in the first instance. But she was breathless and tongue-tied at present—struck dumb with consternation—and could only affect a deep interest in an outgoing fishing-smack, and regard it intently through her glasses, which were shaking visibly in her right hand. It was already in evidence that Mrs. Gladwell was offended in a high degree.

'Very glad to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Gladwell,' said Oliver Toope, with a

most aggravating display of self-possession. 'A friend of my Muriel's—I mean, a friend of Miss Reeves',' he corrected, but with eyes that twinkled strangely, in response to Muriel's frown at him—'should very naturally be a friend of mine; for I have known Muriel—Miss Reeves, I should say—ever since she was a little mite about so high.'

He took great pains to indicate Muriel's exact stature by stooping and placing his hand about a foot and a half from the deck of the pier; but Mrs. Gladwell continued to look stolidly after the fishing-smack which was sailing out of the bay, and paid not the slightest heed to his information.

Yes, Mr. Toope was hasty. He paused, looked back at the lady in the bath-chair, and then swung round to Muriel Reeves, with the light gone from his countenance,

and his complacent grin a dream of the past.

'Muriel, this lady is a friend of yours, I presume?'

'Mrs. Gladwell is my new mistress,' Muriel replied demurely and significantly.

'What! What is that you say?' he almost shouted.

'I only came to Wales last night, to my new occupation in Mrs. Gladwell's service,' she said between lips which were closed somewhat tightly now, as though Miss Reeves was possessed of a little temper of her own—which was a fact, and Oliver Toope had had some experience of it.

That little temper—or his 'hot-headed tomfoolery,' as he had called it later on, when he and Muriel had agreed to differ—recurred to him precipitately, and once more his countenance changed, and a prominent

and decisive chin rested on his turn-down shirt-collar.

'Oh!' said he, 'I did not know. Of course I was not aware of that. In service —you! To that lady? Oh, Lord! what has happened, Muriel, at Kennington since I have been away?'

'Nothing particular.'

'I am sure there has, and you are trying to deceive me!' he exclaimed. 'That's too bad of you. Oh, it's too bad altogether, upon my soul it is! And I won't stand it, whatever you say, Muriel. You had no right to—to——'

'Oliver, don't be a fool, just for this once, to oblige me,' she added in a more conciliatory tone.

'But I don't understand what—what the devil you have been up to!' he blurted forth.

This was too much for Mrs. Gladwell; it became absolutely necessary to recognise the existence of Mr. Oliver Toope after all. Mrs. Gladwell found her voice, and a very icy or vinegary article it had become—a blood-curdling voice, an unexcellent thing in woman.

'Miss Reeves, I must really trouble you to wheel me home immediately. It is quite impossible that I can sit here, in this helpless and unprotected state, and listen to the bad language of your extraordinary friend. Dismiss this person, please,' she added, with extreme loftiness of demeanour, 'and take me to Rossendale at once. I am surprised, Miss Reeves, and shocked, and grievously disappointed in you. I was never treated like this in all my life before, and I shall inform Mr. Gladwell of your extraordinary behaviour directly I reach home. How

dare you, in my weak state? How dare you?'

'Well,' began Mr. Toope, 'of all the——'

'Oliver, go away!' interrupted Muriel, in almost a half-shriek at him.

'What, like this, after you have been insulted in this fashion by that old party—you, of all girls! No, I won't go away. I'll come on with you, and see the end of this business,' he cried, as red in the face as a pillar-box. 'Do you think I'm going to let you——'

'If you don't go away, Oliver, I'll never speak a word to you again,' exclaimed Muriel indignantly.

'Oh, I'll go, then. I don't want to vex you—God forbid, so soon as this, too, and not clapping eyes on you for the last six months. But I'll call this evening, mind.'

'If you come to my house, sir, I shall certainly give you in charge,' said Mrs. Gladwell decisively.

'I shall come, charge or no charge,' he answered, drawing himself up at least a couple more inches as he spoke; 'you may depend upon that, madam. She,' with a nod of his head towards Muriel, 'knows I'm a man not easily frightened. I shall come, and sharpish, too. Rossendale—Gladwell; I shan't forget the names, and I hope you are not difficult to find. Good-morning, madam. Good-day to you, Muriel, for the present.'

He raised his straw hat again, and strode away to the end of the pier as though he had seven-leagued boots on. He was in a towering passion. It was necessary to walk off the steam, and it was lucky for the visitors that they had all drifted from the pier, for Mr. Oliver Toope was running

amuck with his cane held in front of him like a javelin.

Meanwhile, Muriel was gently pushing home the chair which contained the heated body of her mistress, who was rating her in a high voice which attracted not a little attention as they went along the parade and across the asphalte to the high road which meandered round the Head of the Great Storn.

All Mrs. Gladwell's languid manners had evaporated under the influence of the undue excitement brought on by Miss Reeves's unjustifiable behaviour; the annoyance had been too much for the lady, and her placidity of deportment was utterly cast to the winds. Muriel Reeves was surprised at the change—had not expected it from one apparently so fragile and weak; it was a new phase of character for which she was quite unpre-

pared. Muriel Reeves had plumed herself in the old days upon being 'a bit of a judge' of character, too, and her friends had flattered her, perhaps, by telling her so, and here she was utterly at fault and considerably astonished. Why, the boys with the goat-chaises, the fly-drivers, the sniggering touts for shilling drives in rickety vehicles round the Storn, all knew this better than the flushed-faced young beauty pushing the lady homewards with a hand that trembled not a little.

'The new girl's getting it 'ot, Jem,' one man called to another.

'Ah, she didn't know what she was comin' to, I reckon, Bill,' was the answer, accompanied by a guffaw that went off like a pistol-shot.

And Muriel Reeves heard every word with a heart that sank within her. 'What she was coming to!' Ah, it was just that!

If she had only known—if, in her sturdy sense of what was right, what was due from her, what it had been her duty to do for the sake of the family at least, if she had only known! Not that Mrs. Gladwell's tantrums affected her very seriously after the first surprise was recovered from; they only sent her pulse up a degree or two in a temporary fashion that she, a high-spirited girl, suffered from now and then. It was not the events of the morning exactly—she would have been puzzled to define what it was—but her heart sank, despite the fact that an old sweetheart had turned up, was very near to her again, and anxious—that was evident enough—to treat bygones as bygones, and be just the same to her as he had ever been. And she had always been the same, the great silly!—only men are so wilful and foolish and blind.

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Still, if she had only known, poor Muriel, what was lying in wait for her, pressed down and folded between the pages of the Great Book, she would have fled with horror from Rossendale. But we do not always know what is bad for us.

CHAPTER IV.

'POOR MRS. FAREMOUTH.'

We need not dwell at any great length upon the animated lecture, delivered with much fluency and vigorous gesticulation, with which Muriel Reeves was favoured during her homeward route to Rossendale. Muriel thought that she had never been so contemptuously treated in her life—indeed, that life had been a little spoiled and pampered on the whole, some people considered—and she was already sketching forth a course of action on her own part, prompt and decisive enough for anything, which, as it speedily

evaporated into thin air, it is not necessary to dilate upon in these pages.

Muriel did not respond to the objurgations heaped upon her all the way home ; for the first time almost in her life she was conscious of possessing the wonderful gift of 'reserve force.' The readiness of retort, her quick and at times very sharp tongue, never stirred in her sweet mouth on this particular occasion, and, save a little contraction of the broad white brow, it would not have been easy to detect that Miss Muriel Reeves was in any way 'put out.'

Let her think it all over—in her own room, shut in away from all of them, presently. It was not easy to determine how to act—and the spur of the moment was not to prick too quickly the sides of her intent.

Think it all out she must, and with Oliver

Toope to complicate so absurdly the position.

After all, Oliver had marched into the light of day again, just as she had thought that he would a few months ago—not now! —and Mrs. Gladwell's eccentricities did not matter so very much, with old Noll in the foreground just the same as ever—just the same bad-tempered, jealous, aggravating, good-hearted, sensible, straightforward chap whom everybody quarrelled with, but whom everybody liked. At least, she liked him—more than he ever knew perhaps—and after that what did it matter what Mrs. Gladwell thought of her, or what spiteful innuendoes and waspish remarks were hurled at her from the recesses of the bath-chair ?

Mrs. Gladwell was an invalid. She—Muriel—had been warned already not to excite her, and to do her best in all ways to

amuse her. Let the sick woman consider herself 'privileged' for a while. There was plenty of time.

So Mrs. Gladwell had it all to herself, and took satisfaction to herself that her new companion was overwhelmed by her tirades, overpowered by her eloquence of denunciation, her satire, and her contumely. This was a companion to be trained quickly—a companion she should like presently when she had put her completely in her place. It was a real comfort to have someone who could bear to be admonished. Her policy was to act quickly and decisively in this case; an unlooked-for incident had happened, and she had had to take the matter into her own hands. She should suffer for it in due course—the reaction would bring on nervous prostration, bodily ailments of all kinds and conditions, from palpitations to cold sweats;

but she had asserted and won her supremacy, and poor Miss Reeves had not a single word to say in self-defence. This was really something like a companion, and, not having been disturbed by an opposing word, Mrs. Gladwell was inclined to soften when they had reached the gates of Rossendale.

'I trust that this will be a lesson to you, Miss Reeves,' she said; 'I do indeed; but you will agree with me that it is a most unfortunate beginning of our intercourse—a very unfortunate commencement indeed; and only time and a proper sense of your position can make amends for what has occurred this morning.'

Muriel bowed slightly, but did not reply.

'And, upon second thoughts, I do not fancy that I shall trouble Mr. Gladwell with this matter. He has quite enough upon his mind without it, poor fellow!'

Muriel found her voice at last.

'I may trouble Mr. Gladwell myself,' she said quietly.

'Eh! what, Miss Reeves?'

'At least—it is probable,' she added, with a little hesitation.

'But——!'

'But I have to consider a few remarks to which you have given expression—and to reply to them when you are more composed in mind, Mrs. Gladwell,' said Muriel.

'I have spoken out, and there is an end of it,' said Mrs. Gladwell decisively.

'Oh no, madam, this is not the end of it,' Muriel replied, with a little shake of the head; 'this is only the beginning of it.'

And then, having wheeled Mrs. Gladwell to the front entrance, Muriel Reeves left Mr. Gladwell, who had emerged from the dining-room into the large tessellated hall, to

assist his better half from the vehicle and escort her carefully into the house, her hand upon his arm. Muriel went swiftly upstairs towards her own room; but a door on the right of the first landing-place opened softly as she passed, and a white, rigid, yet strangely fair face—as if cut in marble—peered through the aperture at her. This was Mrs. Faremouth, of whom she had caught a passing glimpse last night—the lady whom she was not to regard in any way, unless she particularly wished to put herself out to serve her.

Yes, she was 'a tall young lady,' as Muriel Reeves had described her to her mistress, very fair, and of some seven or eight and twenty years of age, but in the broad daylight which flooded the landing-place it was evident that poor Mrs. Faremouth 'was something more than that.' 'A

sad-looking lady,' Muriel had added to her description ; but Mrs. Faremouth was something more than that also. Never was a face so full of the troubled depths of misery as that which peered from the half-open door. Melancholia had claimed it for its own, and there was a look of fear in those unduly dilated blue eyes that was not pleasant to contemplate. Terror, despair, and melancholy madness were all visible in that white countenance. Never a smile could brighten such a face again, or set lighter curves upon those drooping lips, Muriel thought, as she gazed back at her, wonder-stricken. It was a face which she had seen in dreams—perhaps never in actual waking life before—a beautiful face, but without a single hope in it.

' Who are you ?' she said very eagerly, in the faintest of whispers, to our heroine.

'Tell me, for heaven's sake, why you have come here?'

Muriel was a stout-hearted girl, but she was somewhat appalled. The unexpected, which always happens, was meeting her at every turn of her new life. It was with a voice that faltered a little in spite of her that she replied to the inquiry.

'I am the new companion to your sister.'

'Another?'

'Yes, another,' was the dry response.

'What is your name?' came the same eager and excited whisper.

'Muriel Reeves.'

'You have not come to take me away—really?'

'Really.'

'Ah! that's well. That is so good of you!'

And with a long-drawn sigh which echoed

strangely on the landing-place, Mrs. Faremouth backed into the room and closed the door softly behind her. Muriel proceeded upstairs to her own room on the second-floor with something more to think of than she had bargained for. The face, fair as it was, had frightened the past indignation out of her; her outraged sense of wounded dignity had given way to a new, odd feeling of alarm. There was already in her mind an impression of something strange about the house, the people in it, the life which stretched ahead of her—an atmosphere of mystery which seemed already rising up to encircle her, as a mist from the sea, and presently she might be submerged in it herself. All this perplexed her, and her stay at Rossendale was not twenty-four hours old yet.

CHAPTER V.

MORE SURPRISES.

Muriel Reeves went downstairs to luncheon in a calmer frame of mind; she thought that she had arrived at a decision as to the right course to pursue consistent with her self-respect, but we have already intimated that the resolution came to nothing, and that the oncoming course of events was too strong for her.

It was a dull luncheon party, but this had been anticipated. Mrs. Gladwell was far from well after her undue excitement, and sat at the foot of the table a white-faced,

limp specimen of femininity—'just like a threadpaper,' the waiting-maid said afterwards to the cook downstairs—and uttered scarcely a word whilst the luncheon was in progress.

She ate very little, and regarded her husband with lack-lustre eyes as he made some few attempts to be conversational and to put the new-comer at her ease. James Gladwell sustained the bulk of the conversation, and spoke in a cheery, semi-guttural tone to Mrs. Gladwell chiefly, detailing his meeting with various townsfolk and visitors who had crossed his path that morning, and whose remarks or comments on the news of the day he thought it might interest his wife to recapitulate. But there was little show of interest. Mrs. Gladwell's reaction had reduced her to an unemotional and passive state, and Muriel, glancing askance

at her, began to feel a strange pity for her prostrate condition.

Mr. Gladwell, evidently a shrewd observer in his way, said suddenly:

'Has the heat of the day been too much for you, Lavinia?'

'I am afraid it has, James.'

'You don't feel quite so well to-day?'

'I am afraid I am very much worse.'

'You haven't had anything to excite you, I hope—to put you out in any way this morning?'

'Nothing that is worth troubling you with, James,' she said, her dark eyes turning in Muriel's direction for the first time. 'A little discussion with Miss Reeves, that is all. But there—it is over and done with. I was hasty—you know my way, James, when I am put out.'

'I do,' said James Gladwell dryly; then he burst into a laugh, and Muriel did not know whether to feel offended or to consider Mrs. Gladwell was, in an indirect fashion, making a half-hearted kind of apology for her previous exhibition of bad temper.

'Ah, it is no laughing matter, James,' said Mrs. Gladwell reproachfully; 'it will take me days to recover—my nerves are completely shattered.'

'May I ask what was the subject of contention, Lavinia?' said Mr. Gladwell, looking at Muriel over the rim of the champagne glass that he was raising to his lips—Mr. Gladwell always had a pint bottle of champagne for his lunch—and Muriel felt that that face would break into a smile at his wife's expense if she did not preserve an extra degree of gravity at that particular moment.

'Oh, pray don't let us talk about it,' said his wife. 'Unfortunately I was too hasty. I am often so, Miss Reeves. You must not take me *au sérieux* always.'

'No, no, of course not. Only fancy if I had always taken you *au sérieux*, Lavinia,' added Mr. Gladwell cheerfully. 'Miss Reeves is too sensible a young lady to do that. Why, patience was one of your most attractive credentials to Mrs. Gladwell, Miss Reeves; I assure you it was.'

'I am sorry to have disturbed Mrs. Gladwell in any degree, but——'

'There is no occasion to keep harping on the subject,' said Mrs. Gladwell in a peevish tone again. 'When you understand me better you will not take too readily to heart all that I say, Miss Reeves. You do not know what affliction, heavy trials, and anxiety make of a woman as weak and

impressionable as I am, or as that poor sister of mine upstairs is.'

'My dear, there is no use in bringing Mrs. Faremouth into the question,' said her husband quickly.

'I am growing like her; every day I am getting more like her, James,' she cried, with a sudden effusion of tears. 'That is the fear which is weighing me down, that I shall give way altogether—altogether—altogether!' she repeated in dispair.

'You see, Miss Reeves,' said Gladwell, with a disconsolate shrug of the shoulders, 'that you must make allowance at times for my dear wife's manner. It is only a temporary weakness, a something from which she will recover speedily in this place, as she always does.'

'It is all that hateful London,' said Mrs. Gladwell, making little dabs at her eyes

with the lace handkerchief which she had rolled into a ball, 'and poor Gertrude, upstairs, unnerves me so dreadfully. She is always so miserable and silent. Would you believe it, Miss Reeves, could you credit it of any human being, that she has not spoken to us for two years?'

'Not spoken to you or Mr. Gladwell?' said Muriel, in amazement.

'Not a single word. It is beyond her power now, we think—we are sure. The doctor says it is a kind of nervous paralysis. Her mind is affected, poor dear; it has been so for ten years or more. She was only eighteen then, and a young wife. My mother was like it, died like it, so we fear the very worst,' Mrs. Gladwell ran on. 'Can you be surprised if I am easily excited or cast down?'

Muriel was not very much surprised at

it; but she was considerably astonished at the information which had been gratuitously afforded her. What did they mean by telling her that young Mrs. Faremouth had not spoken for years? Were they attempting for some mysterious reason to impose upon her credulity, or was this Mrs. Faremouth playing a part and deceiving them? There was no object to be gained in telling her a falsehood, which a few hours, a few minutes, would disprove.

'Mrs. Faremouth has not spoken for two years to you?' Muriel murmured.

'Not for two years. Before then she was very uncontrollable indeed. Is it not remarkable, this silence?'

'Neither to the servants—to——'

'Not a living soul. She hears, she understands. In her best days, when she is disposed to take notice of passing things, she

communicates with us by signs,' exclaimed Mrs. Gladwell, 'but not a word escapes her lips. If we could only hear her speak it would be so comforting a sign of her returning health—of the malady having run its course. As it may do, they say—those who are more hopeful of the case than we are. Mr. Gladwell and I have given up all hope. We are so sure—Miss Reeves, what are you looking like that for? What is the matter? Aren't you well?'

'Madam, you are labouring under a delusion,' said Muriel, almost sharply.

'A delusion!'

'Mrs. Faremouth spoke to me this morning.'

'What—is—that you say?' asked Mrs. Gladwell, in little gasps, and with her eyes widely distended.

'Spoke to you!—you don't mean it!'

ejaculated Mr. Gladwell, bounding from his chair, and knocking over his champagne bottle on to the carpet. 'You must be mistaken, Miss Reeves.'

'No, I am not mistaken,' was the reply. 'I was passing her door, when it opened, and the young lady, Mrs. Faremouth, stepped out, and asked me if I had come to take her away. She seemed relieved in mind when I explained that I was not there with any such intention, and said, "Ah, that is so good of you!" Then she went back into the room and shut herself in.'

Mr. Gladwell's fingers went up to his mouth, and pulled at a wisp of moustache, with which his upper lip was adorned, and Muriel saw that his hand was shaking, and that his face had changed to a dull, brick-dust hue. Mrs. Gladwell had clasped her

hands together, and was looking at her husband almost piteously.

'It is awfully strange,' he muttered; 'it is to me at present beyond belief.'

'It is a miracle—or—she has been able to speak all the time,' said Mrs. Gladwell in a husky whisper.

'Or one of the servants has been playing a trick upon Miss Reeves,' said James Gladwell, with a frown. 'By Heaven, she shall not stop another moment in the house if this should be the case!'

'Surely no one would make a joke of so solemn an affliction as this has been to us,' murmured Mrs. Gladwell.

'A bad servant will do anything,' affirmed Mr. Gladwell.

'It was no servant,' said Muriel; 'this was a tall, fair-haired lady, very handsome, very slight of figure, very feeble.'

'Yes—it must be Gertrude. Miss Reeves, will you do me a great favour?' said Mrs. Gladwell. 'I have no right to ask you—I have not been kind to you—there!—but if you only would, it would be so great a favour, and help us so much to solve a mystery.'

'What can I do?' asked Muriel hesitatingly.

'What can Miss Reeves possibly do?' asked her husband, with a doubtful look from one to the other. 'It will not do to hazard any rash experiment, Lavinia.'

'No, no; but it is only to make assurance doubly sure, James,' urged Lavinia eagerly. 'If this be true—if a change for the better has occurred in this strange, sudden fashion—Gertrude would probably speak to Miss Reeves again. The ice having once been

broken, it would not be difficult to get further speech from her. She who would not reply to us at present, might respond to Miss Reeves if she went at once into her room.'

'She might do so,' said Mr. Gladwell thoughtfully, still pulling at the ends of his moustache; 'but is it quite fair to expose Miss Reeves to so trying an ordeal?'

Muriel had already thought that it was hardly fair; but she was interested now, and willing to be of service.

'I do not mind—if you wish it,' she replied.

'My sister-in-law is insane, you are aware, Miss Reeves,' said Mr. Gladwell. 'She is hopelessly insane.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But she is not violent?'

'Oh no! It is a sad case of melancholia,

and it has lasted some years,' replied Mrs. Gladwell; 'but she is not in any way dangerous, we are happy to say. And if you would, to oblige us, step upstairs, and ask a question or two—if you would, indeed, act in any way that appears most natural to yourself, and would appear so to an invalid —we shall be considerably indebted to you.'

'Now?'

'The sooner the better, so as to prepare us for any change in Mrs. Faremouth that seems likely to occur. A change for the better, I trust,' Mr. Gladwell added; but Muriel detected no small amount of acting in the eyes so sadly upturned to the ceiling.

It occurred to her at this juncture that she did not like Mr. Gladwell so well as she liked his wife, which was an odd impression, considering the breezy morning she had spent

with the lady in question. What there was to object to in Mr. Gladwell it was beyond her power to define. He was suave, courteous, anxious to render her stay at Rossendale agreeable. He would neither be a harsh taskmaster nor an exacting individual. He was probably a good-tempered man, possibly an amiable one, but there came across her mind the assurance that she did not admire him, and that she should not care to trust him. An unjust decision, but she could not help it, or explain why it had thus impressed her so suddenly and thoroughly.

'If you would only go to her, Miss Reeves,' said Mrs. Gladwell, still with her hands clasped together, 'and relieve us from anxiety.'

'What can I say to Mrs. Faremouth? How shall I be able to offer a reason for my intrusion upon her?'

'Oh, she is used to us—to the servants—coming into her room at various times. You will not surprise her.'

'Shall I offer to sit with her for a short time—ask if she has any objection to my company?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Gladwell; 'say we are both out, and that you feel dull down here alone.'

'No, I shall not say that,' replied Muriel quickly.

'Why not?'

'It is not the truth.'

'Oh, the truth!' cried Mr. Gladwell scoffingly. 'One does not get on in the world by sticking to the truth, Miss Reeves.'

'Then one is better out of the world,' was the sharp response.

'You will not think so when you are a few

years older, young lady,' he answered; 'but you may adopt your own course. We are only anxious to learn the truth in this case.'

'I will go.'

Muriel Reeves was out of the room before another word could be exchanged. As the door closed behind her, husband and wife looked at each other very intently, very critically.

'She is sharp, that companion of yours,' muttered Mr. Gladwell. 'Too sharp altogether.'

'But is it possible that Gertrude has spoken to her?'

'It is remarkable, certainly. I will go upstairs in a minute or two and listen at the door.'

'To think that her voice has come back to her, James!'

'And her senses, eh?'

'I should be very glad.'

'Ah—yes—exactly. But,' with a sudden exclamation which startled his listener, 'good God, what will become of us?'

CHAPTER VI.

IN MRS. FAREMOUTH'S ROOM.

It was with a heavy heart that Muriel Reeves went upstairs to Mrs. Faremouth's room. She had accepted a responsibility which should not have been forced upon her; but it had been put as a favour, and she did not know how to say no. She had not been treated well by the lady who had asked the favour even, but there was real distress—real anxiety—and she had willingly offered her services. Perhaps she was a little curious—who knows? All did not seem fair sailing in the house of Rossendale—

there was much to perplex her therein; strange people in it, strange things happening, strange events foreshadowed. She would not gather to herself the harvest of a quiet life in such a house as this! She had accepted the task; but the nearer she approached young Mrs. Faremouth's room, the more she shrank from it. She was taking a part in the mystery, and her place, surely, should have been away from it altogether. What business was it of hers? What right had she to interfere, and for the sake of people who had treated her contumeliously?

But if it were to be done, it were well it should be done quickly.

She tapped lightly on the panel of the door, but no voice called to her to enter; all within was as silent as the grave. She knocked a second time without eliciting anything in the way of response; then she

turned the handle, opened the door, and went softly in, a sudden fluttering about the region of the chest informing her that she was not in any wise so free from 'nerves' and 'palpitations' as she thought she was. Was Mrs. Gladwell's complaint 'catching'? she wondered.

She closed the door behind her and came to a full stop. The room was very much in shadow; the brown canvas blinds had been drawn down before the window, either to save the carpet and curtains from the sun's rays or to suit the fancy of Mrs. Faremouth. For an instant it seemed that the room was in total darkness, as she shut out the glare of sunlight upon the landing-place; but Muriel soon became accustomed to the half-light in which she was submerged; everything grew by degrees distinct to her gaze.

It was a large well-furnished sitting-room, communicating with a second room. Sitting in a chair by the fireplace—which was empty and black—was Mrs. Faremouth, judging by the tall form and slight girlish figure. Muriel had no opportunity of seeing her face, which was concealed by a long black silk apron that Mrs. Faremouth had turned up from her waist and thrown over her head. The lady was sitting in deep shadow, the light being an offence to her as well as the room and everything in it, unless this was an ostrich-like defence against the entrance of a stranger, Mrs. Faremouth seeing nobody by this strategy, and not wishing anyone to see her. It was a mute, statuesque figure sitting there, and sent a feeling of creepiness through the form of Muriel Reeves, but she took a deep breath and said :

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Faremouth ; I

have come to sit with you for a few minutes, if you have no objection to my company.'

There was no reply; the silent figure with the black silk apron over her head did not waver, but the thin white hands, clasped together upon her lap, might have taken an extra degree of tension to themselves; Muriel thought that they moved, but the next instant she was uncertain if her surmise had been correct.

After a pause she went on:

'I am Muriel Reeves, Mrs. Gladwell's companion, to whom you spoke a little while ago. I hope you do not regard my visit as an intrusion. If so, I will go away.'

Mrs. Faremouth made no response, and Muriel Reeves felt that she was at the end of her resources. There did not seem anything more to say: Mrs. Faremouth was not inclined for conversation or for company, and

there was nothing more to be done save to go downstairs and state that the experiment to extract further speech from her had turned out an absolute failure.

Muriel stood by the door, put her hand forth towards it, then hesitated again. Perhaps young Mrs. Faremouth was asleep and this was not a fair test, after all. Perhaps Mrs. Faremouth would wake up and look round if she waited a few minutes; there was no necessity for undue haste, and they were anxious downstairs to learn the truth. It would be good news to take to them that Mrs. Faremouth had spoken to her again—how strange if symptoms of a better estate in this poor invalid should date from the first day of Muriel's stay at Rossendale. She, Muriel Reeves, would have brought good luck with her to Great Storn's Head.

Muriel crossed the room to the fireplace,

looked at herself instinctively in the great looking-glass, and thought how brown she was, and how suddenly sunburnt she had become, until she remembered the drawn blinds and the reflection which they cast upon her, after which her attention was directed to the ornaments upon the mantelpiece, odd Japanese and Indian monstrosities in bronze and porcelain—ugly things every one of them, thought Muriel.

There were four large photographs, cabinets, in gray plush frames upon the walls, two on each side of the looking-glass, and Muriel was inquisitive enough to inspect them next. The two portraits on the left hand side, and nearer to the silent woman, were well executed photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Gladwell ; flattering enough, with the lines pencilled out and a general air of careful manipulation over them, but still fair

likenesses of the couple downstairs. The portraits on the left, taken in the United States, both of them, were those of a Mrs. Faremouth of happier days, and with a sweet smile flickering round the corners of the mouth, and of a young man, sharp-featured, and with a pointed beard ; rather a good-looking young man, but with eyes popping out of his head, thought Muriel.

Muriel Reeves gave quite a start when she came to this portrait, and stood regarding it with a puzzled air. Where had she seen it before ? It was not the first time that she had looked at that face—at what time and under what circumstances had it presented itself to her observation ? It was almost like the face of a friend : a something that did not make her feel entirely a stranger in that room. Whose face could

it possibly be? It appertained to a world of her own almost, and yet was hanging up in the house of the Gladwells. Was she getting 'dazed' with all the rest of them in that house?

Her new and awakened interest put Mrs. Faremouth from her thoughts for an instant.

'I am sure I have seen you before,' she murmured half aloud. 'Ah! I remember: it is in Em's photographic album at home, or else it——'

And then she was silent, and amid a crush of bewildering thoughts she tried hard to bring back the face more completely to her recollection. There was a story connected with that man; in some way it seemed as if he had crossed her path, or she had seen him on the stage, or mixed up in a crowd somewhere. Was this man an

actor, singer, musician, or mountebank ? or only one of those celebrities whom reporters interview, and newspapers make paragraphs concerning, a something of a kind that was patent to the new order of illustrated newspapers and magazines ? No, not a celebrity, but someone nearer home and her own life or her sister's, and yet too far away to call to mind.

She put out her hand towards the portrait, and a voice seemed to say, very close to her ear, and in the quickest of whispers :

'Do not touch that !'

Muriel gave a little jump and turned round, but there was no one in the room save herself and the tall, fair-haired young lady, still sitting very upright and rigid, with her black silk apron covering her face.

'I beg pardon, Mrs. Faremouth ; did you speak to me ?'

There was no answer, and Muriel Reeves began to think that she had been the victim of her own disordered fancies; her nerves were overstrung and inclined to play tricks with her. Still she hazarded one more remark on the off chance of having been addressed by Mrs. Faremouth.

'I am interested in the portrait of this gentleman. I have seen it somewhere, I am sure, before.'

The wasted hands went up at once to the silk apron and dragged it impetuously from a grave, marble face, from which the blue eyes gleamed strangely. But Mrs. Faremouth did not speak to Muriel, who felt cold and uncomfortable beneath the other's searching scrutiny. The lips moved as if they were about to frame the words into a question, then a low, unearthly wail escaped her, and the black silk apron was placed

over her head again. Mrs. Faremouth had withdrawn once more from public observation, and if she had intended to address the young woman who had intruded upon her retirement she had thought better of it and relapsed into quiescence.

Muriel felt that to stay longer would be inexcusable ; her mission had been a failure, and there was nothing left her but to go. She had wished to be of assistance, but she felt now, and a blush rose to her face as it occurred to her, that she had acted very much like a spy. If the young, fragile, suffering woman in the chair had mental power sufficient to estimate the intruder at her worth, she would think that a spy, and nothing better than a spy, had stolen to her room for some hidden purpose beyond her poor powers to fathom.

Muriel went slowly and sorrowfully to the

door, turned the handle, and passed on to the landing-place, where Mr. Gladwell was awaiting her, with his hands in his pockets, his briarwood pipe in his mouth, his face full of aggravating and almost contemptuous smiles.

'Well, Miss Reeves,' he said, 'I am afraid your visit to Mrs. Faremouth has not led to a highly satisfactory result.'

CHAPTER VII.

A SURPRISE ON THE SANDS.

Muriel Reeves was taken aback by discovering Mr. Gladwell so close to the door of Mrs. Faremouth's room. She was annoyed, possibly disgusted, as well as surprised. He had been playing the eavesdropper, and he made no attempt to disguise the part which he had assumed.

'No, the result has not been satisfactory,' she said, in answer to his question. 'Very far from it. Have you been listening?'

'Yes, I have,' he said, unabashed. 'I thought that you would prefer a witness to

the facts, or that I might be of service to you if anything untoward occurred.'

'Was anything untoward likely to occur?'

'It was not wholly improbable.'

'Is she dangerous, after all? Mrs. Gladwell did not say so.'

'At times one may say that she is dangerous.'

'And yet you and Mrs. Gladwell sent me into danger!' exclaimed Muriel warmly.

'Not into danger, surely, if I were close at hand to protect you, Miss Muriel,' he said.

Muriel hardly liked this introduction of her Christian name into the question. It gave her a shock to be so quickly addressed in familiar terms, but she could scarcely take offence at it.

'If you were here to protect me from

violence—if it were necessary to be on guard, Mr. Gladwell, I am obliged by your consideration,' she said.

He looked at her critically, puffed solemnly at his pipe, and then turned upon his heel to go downstairs. On the top stair he paused as if to allow her to precede him.

She noticed the movement, and said :

'Thank you, I am going to my room, unless you think that Mrs. Gladwell is desirous of my company.'

'Of course she is anxious to know the result of your experiment.'

'But I have nothing to tell her.'

'Mrs. Faremouth has not spoken, I know; but I think my wife would prefer your evidence to mine,' he said, with a slight bow, 'and for the reason that she does not always place entire credence in my version

of a story. I am unfortunately too imaginative for her.'

He laughed heartily, and seemed to expect that Muriel would laugh too, in which he was disappointed. Muriel Reeves was in no laughing mood just then.

She went downstairs to inform Mrs. Gladwell that her mission had been a failure—she thought that she would not mention the fugitive impression upon her mind that she had been told not to touch the photograph—and found Mrs. Gladwell lying asleep upon the couch. Mr. Gladwell had followed her, and she glanced from the sleeping figure to him as if for further advice as to the next step.

'She is tired out, poor woman,' he said. 'You need not wait, Miss Reeves; one of the maids shall tell you when Mrs. Gladwell is awake.'

Muriel thanked him and withdrew, and Mr. Gladwell stood and regarded his wife critically. Presently he walked to the window and looked out, sauntered to the front door and looked out, finally made a snatch at his hat from a peg in the hall, and bowled along down the front path into the street, and away towards the town, a man glad of the opportunity to escape 'the domesticities,' and in a terrible hurry to get away from them.

Mr. Gladwell seemed to know, and to be on good terms with, everybody in the place. Neighbours out for a stroll nodded to him familiarly; the general body of loafers—touts and boatmen and flymen—touched their hats as he came upon parade; visitors, who were rather thick on the promenade that sunny summer afternoon, regarded him with a friendly gaze, knowing him by sight

so well. He walked sharply the whole extent of the parade, and when further away from the company, at the extreme end of the town, with a field behind him full of weeds and piles of new bricks, significant of 'this eligible building site' about to be appropriated, he made for the long stretch of sea-sand, threw himself down thereon, re-filled and re-lighted his pipe, and gravely stared out to sea with his face in shadow, and his troublous thoughts settling upon it thickly.

James Gladwell, at Rossendale, on the pier, on promenade, in society, anywhere or everywhere, was cheerful enough—at times boisterously cheerful—but as we have suspected already he had his silent, thoughtful hours, even his bad quarter of an hour, and he had come to this retired part of the beach to think out for himself the few

matters that were perplexing him, which rendered him restless, dissatisfied, and afraid! Yes, here was something of which he was afraid, for all his position in the world, his general air of respectability, and financial stability, the esteem in which he was held by the townsfolk as a man who paid his way, and paid promptly, hence a man to be twice blessed.

But he was in trouble, it was evident. With the sand and sea to himself he was a different man entirely; and it was a face almost as full of misery as young Mrs. Faremouth's that was turned towards the tossing waves.

It was a long, deep think; and so completely was he submerged in his own 'brown study,' that a sailing boat, in which were two men, tacked and turned, and came swiftly towards his part of the beach with-

out arresting his attention. It came straight in his direction, and was beached within a few yards of him, but he saw it not. It was too common a feature of life at Great Storn's Head to interest him in the least degree. He lay and smoked, and stared at the sea, and thought nothing of the new comers upon the scene. They were every-day figures, and he was scarcely conscious of their existence, until the sail was rapidly lowered, the boat hauled out of reach of the incoming tide, and one of the two men—a slightly formed man of middle height—pitched himself full length upon the sands, tossed his straw hat impatiently away from him, and groaned as one might do who was unutterably fatigued. The second man, who was tall, and of an athletic build, looked down upon the prostrate figure of his companion, and laughed.

'What, tired, Claude, already?'

'Yes, I am awfully tired, Oliver.'

'The sea should have blown more life into you.'

'It seems to have blown the life out of me,' said the other wearily; 'and as the life is not worth anything, so much the better.'

'Ah, we won't go into that question again, old man,' replied Oliver Toope, for he it was who dropped into a sitting position by the recumbent form of his friend. 'You're in one of your maudlin moods, and they always aggravate me.'

'You began questioning and cross-questioning, not I,' said the elder man tetchily; 'let me be for a while, and I shall be all right.'

'Do you feel ill?'

'No.'

'Has anything occurred to disturb you?'

'Nothing. It's only one of my "dull days," Oliver. You should be pretty well used to them by this time.'

'Oh, I am quite used to them,' was the reply; 'don't apologise.'

Both men became silent, and the younger and stronger, finding there was nothing particular to do, turned round and looked towards James Gladwell, who was some twenty yards away from them, on a higher elevation of the beach. It was this James Gladwell, who, with his hands clutching his knees, was now sitting up and regarding the new comers, his eyes protruding with amazement, his mouth half open, his pipe lying neglected by his side. Had some one whom he had known years ago, who had died and been buried, risen up from the dead, and stood before him in his grave-

clothes, James Gladwell's countenance could not have expressed a greater horror.

'Here! It is true then, every word of it. My God!' he muttered to himself.

Before James Gladwell could assume a calm demeanour the young man rose and came towards him. His heart sank as the stranger approached, but he made no effort to move. He felt as though he had been struck into stone, and that this was an inexorable fate advancing. His eyes wandered for a fleeting instant to the form of the other man stretched full length upon the sand, and he soliloquised again:

'Why did I come this way? Why did they land here?'

Oliver Toope, unaware of the effect his disembarkation had created, and only thinking that the gentleman whom he was ap-

proaching looked very like a crazy individual, said :

'I beg your pardon, could you oblige me with a light? My vesuvians have come suddenly to an end.'

James Gladwell drew from his pocket a silver match-box and passed it over to the speaker without uttering a word.

'Thank you,' said Oliver, lighting his pipe after the usual preliminaries ; 'greatly obliged. A fine day, is it not?' he added, as a highly original observation to wind up with.

James Gladwell nodded and tried to reply, but his tongue had stuck to the roof of his mouth in his consternation.

Oliver returned the match-box, and looked almost admiringly at the Gladwell scarf-pin —a big pearl scored accurately like a globe —and then scuttled down the slope to the side of his companion.

'I fancy, Claude, that fellow behind us is next door to a lunatic,' he said; 'only he's got a breast-pin worth a cool hundred, and they couldn't have let him out with that on his chest.'

But Claude had fallen asleep already, and tired and worn out he looked in his sleep. Oliver regarded his friend attentively for a moment, shook his head, and then sat down again and surveyed his own sailing-boat critically.

A minute or two afterwards, not longer, he turned round with the intention of bestowing another glance at Mr. Gladwell, but that gentleman was gone. Oliver looked right and left, and beheld him some distance away, making a cross-cut towards the parade, and evidently in a great hurry to get home.

'Soft. Must be,' said Oliver.

Suddenly his quick eye detected a plush tobacco-pouch on the spot where Mr. Gladwell had sat, and Oliver on the instant was upon his feet again making for it, securing it, and then running after the gentleman who had been so careless regarding his worldly possessions.

James Gladwell looked round at that moment, and becoming aware of the approaching figure, he broke into a run himself, as if by instinct.

'Oh yes, mad as a hatter,' said Oliver, who increased his own rate of progression in order to come up with him.

The next instant James Gladwell stopped. The folly of making a race of it had struck him, and he waited for Oliver Toope to come up.

'Well, sir, what next?' he asked sharply.

'Oh, not much—pray do not excite your-

self,' was the blunt response. 'You have left your tobacco-pouch on the sands, and I thought you might like to take it home with you. Catch.'

But Oliver Toope did not fling the pouch towards Mr. Gladwell, who had already opened his hands instinctively. The name of 'J. Gladwell' meandering across it in a thin line of gold cord had arrested Oliver's attention, and taken away his breath in his turn.

'By thunder!' he exclaimed; 'that's curious. Gladwell! Is your name Gladwell, then?'

'That is my name,' said Mr. Gladwell, who had advanced and snatched the pouch from Oliver's hands; but Oliver did not offer a remark on the rudeness of the action. 'What of it? What if it is?'

'Do you live at Rossendale?'

Mr. Gladwell gasped painfully, but he managed to growl forth:

'What business is that of yours, sir?'

'A Miss Muriel Reeves is your wife's companion, lady-help, maid-of-all-work, or something for which she is utterly unfitted, as I have told her already. Is that correct?' said Oliver Toope, very sharply in his turn.

James Gladwell had thought it impossible to be still more astonished, but he was. What had Muriel Reeves to do with those two men, unless she was in his house by some strange chain of circumstances, by an elaborate plot, as a spy?—and yet that could not be. No, his natural shrewdness told him, in a second hasty thought, that that was impossible. But he was bewildered; it was all so strange, so long a distance out of the common way.

'Why do you ask?'

'Miss Reeves is a friend of mine—I think of calling upon her this evening.'

'Miss Reeves is in close attendance upon my wife, an invalid lady, and can see no followers whilst in our employ.'

'She'll see me,' said Oliver, nodding his head emphatically. 'Don't make any mistake about that. I have told Mrs. Gladwell so already.'

'You have — you —— But I don't want any further conversation with you, sir. I will not have it.'

'All right!' was the reply. 'Thank you very much for taking back your tobacco-pouch, though. So glad you did not lose it, Mr. Gladwell. Good afternoon.'

Oliver Toope, who had a keen sense of humour, took off his hat and made Mr.

Gladwell a low obeisance—quite an Eastern kind of salaam; and Mr. Gladwell, reddening for the first time, gave a stiff half-bow in return, and then turned his back upon Mr. Toope, who looked after him for a while before he burst into a roar of laughter.

'As bad as the missus,' he remarked. 'Well, of all the—upon my soul,' he exclaimed, darting off in a fresh direction of thought, 'if Muriel has not got amongst a nice set of snapping crocodiles! What a pair to put up with! But it shan't last. No, by Jove! not for a week, if I have any voice in the matter, and I think I have. Ha, ha! I think I have, after all!'

CHAPTER VIII.

SAFE AT HOME.

Mr. Gladwell went on his way like a man in a dream. If he had awakened in his own dining-room from one of his disturbed sleeps in his easy-chair—after a habit he had—he would not have been in the least surprised. He would have even said, 'Thank God!' But it was not a dream, although all that had happened had been as unreal and extraordinary as are all dream incidents after heavy meals—this was true. Here were phantoms from the past, but they were alive and ready to

work mischief; to bring ruin and shame to him, to face him with the great misdeeds of his life. And they were not to be exorcised; they must come and confront him, and Lavinia, and Lavinia's mad sister; and there did not seem the possibility of escape from the complications which were rising up before him, which were enmeshing him already. It could not be chance that had brought those two men to Great Storn's Head—no coincidence could be so remarkable as that—it was a plot against him. He had been found out, and the revelation was at hand. He had fought and struggled and lied and schemed in vain. This was the end of it!

He passed the time between his return home and the dinner-hour in his bedroom, sitting on the floor, with the door of his iron safe open, and various papers which

he had taken from it strewn upon the carpet. These papers he arranged systematically, and returned to the safe before Mrs. Gladwell came upstairs to harass him with questions.

To Mrs. Gladwell he detailed the particulars of his chance meeting with Oliver Toope, of the tobacco-pouch incident, and of the inquiries as to his name; but he said not a word of the second man, who had been called Claude by his companion, and whose appearance on the sands had filled his soul with consternation. He would await events —he would be even prepared to elude them, carrying with him those papers which he had put in order that afternoon; but he would not distress Lavinia by any of his fears until the hour and the man were closer to them. Supposing this was only a striking likeness after all? Ten years

had gone by, and the man would not look like that now; he would have changed had he been alive—even for him to be alive would be akin to the miraculous. And if alive, what then? What was to happen afterwards? What would the man say? What would he and Lavinia do in self-defence?

These thoughts did not trouble Mr. Gladwell at dinner-time. He had had time to recover, and he was his usual self before Muriel Reeves and his wife. The day had been full of surprises. The information proffered early in the day that Mrs. Faremouth had spoken to Muriel Reeves had been startling, and almost, to the Gladwells, alarming news; but it had for the time passed into the background of everybody's thoughts. The afternoon experiment with the lady above-stairs had been a failure,

and now the question of Oliver Toope had presented itself, and had to be considered.

Muriel was surprised at dinner by the introduction of his name, and still more by the new manner of host and hostess, which was conciliatory and almost kind.

'Mrs. Gladwell and I have been talking upstairs, Miss Muriel, of your friend, Mr. Toope,' said Mr. Gladwell, somewhat pompously, and with a smile which Muriel did not know how to construe. 'Of course, it is awkward and remarkable that he should have come to Great Storn's Head, although it is a well-known watering-place enough, and that I should have met him on the sands this afternoon.'

'You have seen him also, Mr. Gladwell?'

'Yes, I will explain in a minute or two; but what Mrs. Gladwell and I have decided upon with reference to that gentleman and

you it may be as well to inform you at once,' he said.

Muriel inclined her head, and waited patiently for the information, quite prepared to fire up if anything disparaging were said concerning Oliver Toope, or her relations with him. But the next remark from Mr. Gladwell—who did all the talking, although there were signs of Mrs. Gladwell being very anxious to cut in—wholly changed the condition of affairs.

'Mrs. Gladwell and I have arrived at the conclusion that it would be only fair to you that you should see Mr. Toope,' Mr. Gladwell continued in his oratorical way; 'and we wish you to understand that we should be happy to assist you in every way in our power. Mr. Toope will probably call this evening—I think he told me that that was his intention—and my little study

is quite at your disposal for half an hour, or an hour, should he feel disposed to keep his word.'

'Oh he always keeps his word,' said Muriel quickly. 'He is very truthful.'

Mr. Gladwell laughed.

'Thank you for the concession,' she added. 'I am afraid I have innocently been the cause of annoyance to you both, but, of course, I have no wish that Mr. Toope should intrude here more than once. We have not met for ten months, and I —I think that he is anxious to clear up a little misunderstanding which has existed between us. I do not know for certain,' she said, blushing very vigorously as two pairs of eyes were fixed upon her, 'but I —I think that is the object with which he is coming. After that he will leave here immediately.'

'Leave here?'

'It will be my wish, for a while,' she said thoughtfully.

'And will he obey your wishes implicitly, Miss Muriel?'

'I think he will—I'm sure he will,' she added.

Mr. Gladwell drew a deep breath of relief, but he was deeply perplexed. Was it a mistake altogether? People whose lives have been in shadow — lives with curtains before them—are so easily scared and jump to strange conclusions.

'Is Mr. Toope alone at Great Storn's Head?' he asked.

'I do not know. It is more than probable.'

'May I ask what he is by trade or profession?' inquired Mrs. Gladwell.

'An engineer, madam.'

'Indeed. He is singularly abrupt even for an engineer, I should say.'

'He is a little abrupt,' said Muriel, who found some difficulty in keeping a smile back. 'He used to offend a great many of his clients when he was in business for himself in a little way in Lambeth, but on board ship he is liked very much.'

'I should not have thought it,' remarked Mrs. Gladwell. 'Is he clever?'

'No, madam, I don't think he is clever,' was the frank response, 'and he does not think so himself.'

Mr. Gladwell laughed again, and very heartily, at this avowal, and Mrs. Gladwell thought her lord and husband had taken too much champagne to make such a noise as that and jar her nerves so unnecessarily; but she made no comment.

She turned to Muriel with a question of her own.

'You are engaged to him, I presume?'

'I was engaged to him some time ago, Mrs. Gladwell.'

'You quarrelled?'

'Yes.'

'And this is to be—reconciliation?' she asked curiously.

'I—I can't say,' was the low reply.

'My dear Lavinia,' said Mr. Gladwell, 'I don't think we have quite a right to put all these leading questions to Miss Muriel. It is, upon my word, hardly fair.'

'I ask too many questions, I know,' said Mrs. Gladwell; 'I do not always get answered, though. You have not told me where you went this morning at half-past five, James. What is the secret?'

'My dear, there is no secret about it.'

The maid entered with two cards upon a silver salver, and went to the side of Muriel, who took them from the tray and read aloud :

'Mr. Oliver Toope. Mr. Claude Faremouth.'

CHAPTER IX.

MAKING IT UP.

Muriel Reeves felt herself grow hot and cold by turns as she sat with the two cards in her hand, staring almost helplessly before her, for the effect upon Mr. and Mrs. Gladwell of the arrival of the visitors was too surprising to be overlooked. Mrs. Gladwell sat back in a half-faint, with her eyes closed, whilst her husband sprang from his chair, sat down again, breathed hard, and pressed one hand across his forehead.

'Faremouth!' repeated Muriel, wondering. 'That is another coincidence, of course.'

'Of course—of course—it is not an uncommon name,' said Mr. Gladwell, stammering very much; 'but it is unfair of Mr. Toope to bring a friend with him. I cannot see the necessity; I don't know why he should have committed such an outrageous breach of propriety—it is beyond my comprehension altogether.'

There was a forced indignation in his tones, but much bodily prostration in his attitude.

'James, if it is——' began his wife, when her husband, who had lost his usual dulcet tone of address to her, shouted vehemently, and brought her to a full stop.

'Lavinia, do not interfere!' he cried. 'Let Miss Reeves join her friends. I trust you understand, Miss Reeves, we both wish it.'

'Yes, if I am capable of understanding

anything now, I think you do,' was the dry response. 'So if you will excuse me——' and Muriel rose.

Husband and wife were only too glad to grant permission for Muriel Reeves's withdrawal.

As the door closed Mrs. Gladwell exclaimed:

'What does it all mean, James? Could you have been prepared for this?'

'No, not for this,' he answered, with a visible shudder; 'not so soon as this. God help us!'

'It is Claude Faremouth, then?'

'It is.'

'You knew he was at Great Storn's Head?'

Mr. Gladwell nodded.

'What is to be done?' she asked in a husky whisper.

'I don't know,' he answered.

'Not know?'

'We must wait events. He may not—I say, he may not know that we are here.'

'He and that man Toope have been in search of us, and now they are in the house!' shrieked Mrs. Gladwell in accents of despair.

'Hush! Don't get excited. We can only wait. There is no alternative.'

This strange couple were attached to one another, had faith in one another, took courage by one another's side, weak as both of them were.

James Gladwell crossed to the chair close to his wife and took her hand in his, and thus they sat hand in hand as lovers might have done, and the maid coming in later on gave a little jump to find them thus.

'Are those gentlemen still in my study,

Mary, with Miss Reeves?' asked Mr. Gladwell.

'The tall, dark gentleman is.'

'And the other—where is he?' asked Mr. Gladwell, with a vehemence which led Mary, who was a nervous girl, to back herself against the wall and glare open-mouthed at her master.

'He did not stop a minute, sir.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'I did not hear the door close.'

'It was open. I was standing at the door, sir, when the thin gentleman came out and walked past me into the street, sir.'

'He has gone!' husband and wife exclaimed together when the servant had retired; and they took his departure as a good omen, although an instant afterwards

James Gladwell struck his hand impatiently upon the table.

'I cannot make it out!' he said.

But the explanation of the sudden departure of Claude Faremouth was simple enough. When Muriel had entered the study of Mr. Gladwell, she found both gentlemen standing on the hearthrug waiting for her appearance. Oliver Toope advanced and shook hands.

'I told you I should come,' he said, with a laugh. 'Neither master nor mistress has frightened me away, Muriel.'

'Mr. Gladwell has been kind enough to place his study at our disposal for a little while.'

'Mr. Gladwell is in a better temper than he was this afternoon,' remarked Oliver quietly; 'but you will allow me, Muriel, to introduce to you an American friend of mine.

I have spoken of him to you before, I think—Mr. Faremouth. Mr. Faremouth, this is Muriel Reeves. I have spoken of her to you, I know.'

It was an odd introduction, and Mr. Faremouth seemed embarrassed. He bowed, and stammered forth a few conventional words, of which 'great pleasure' were the only two that were decently articulate, and then he looked in a shy, nervous manner at his friend. He was a quick, restless-eyed man, not without good looks of his own.

'Yes, you may go now,' Oliver said, with a laugh. 'I am perfectly safe. I am in good hands.'

'Yes, I am certain of that.'

Mr. Claude Faremouth made a formal bow and took his departure. The servant-maid was standing at the open door getting

a mouthful of fresh air surreptitiously, or looking out for a lover in the shoemaking trade, who generally passed from his daily labours at this time, and went home in a more happy frame of mind if he caught a glimpse of her at the door or window, and Mr. Faremouth, with another bow, passed out of the house, turned when he was in the front garden, looked up at all the windows, and then sauntered along the road towards the sea-front.

Muriel had already turned to her remaining visitor, and said impetuously :

'Oliver, who is he ?'

'Who is he ?' repeated Oliver, taken aback by Muriel's excitement. 'Oh, a weak-headed, good sort of a fellow enough ; one of the unlucky beggars of this world with a warm heart and a tile loose.'

'How long have you known him ?'

'Three years or so.'

'And his name is Faremouth?'

'Yes. What of that?' he asked. 'Bless my soul, Muriel, I have not fought my way into the Gladwell's den to talk of Claude Faremouth.'

'No; but it is so singular.'

'What is so singular?'

Muriel hesitated. She felt that she was on the threshold of a revelation, and she became suddenly and strangely afraid to approach it too rashly. There was an instinctive feeling that harm might come of it, that a rash word might bring about much trouble, that it would be wise and just of her to hold her peace until she had time to shape her thoughts more clearly. This Claude Faremouth was an older likeness of the portrait which hung upstairs in the silent woman's room—the same sharp eyes

and thin cheeks, with a pointed beard like Guy Fawkes.

'Singular,' said Muriel slowly, 'because I have seen—somewhere—a photograph of him.'

'Oh yes, I know,' Oliver replied quickly. 'When I was in the States eighteen months ago I sent you over a photo of a group of boating men — winners of the Scallywag Cup—and Faremouth and I were standing in the centre of the gang. Don't you remember?'

'Yes, I remember,' said Muriel.

It was the face in that group which had come partly to her mind when she was looking at Claude Faremouth's portrait on the wall of the room upstairs. A younger portrait, but of the same man surely.

'How did you become acquainted with him?'

'I met him first on board ship. Don't you admire him?'

'He is a strange-looking man,' said Muriel evasively; 'a man who might be any age. Has he a father or mother living?'

'No.'

'A wife?'

'His wife is alive. But he does not care to talk of her,' Oliver added, 'for some reason or other which is not particularly clear to me. They are separated—that is about all I know. Any more questions concerning this gentleman?' he inquired, with a half-frown.

'Yes, plenty,' was the sharp response. 'Don't look black at me. What is he doing at Great Storn's Head?'

'We are coasting together. We are going round Wales,' was the reply. 'I am enjoying

the first holiday I have had for years—the first chance of a holiday.'

'Have you come into a fortune, Oliver?'

'No; I am simply pitching my small savings away in the fashion which is natural to me now.'

'Now!'

'I have no one to save for, nothing to prepare for. Everything is a blank since you gave me up for good,' he replied ruefully.

'For your good.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'You get on so much better without me, so it must be for your good, Oliver. I always thought,' she added demurely, 'that you would get on so well in the world if you were not tied to me.'

'Don't talk such utter absurdity, Muriel,' he cried passionately. 'You know, as well as I do, that—that I haven't known a happy

moment since you said you would not have anything more to do with me—since you threw me over like an old——'

'Like an old fool,' said Muriel, 'to fly into one of your wretched tempers about—what was it about, Noll?'

Oliver Toope looked puzzled, and even for an instant gave one claw-like scratch at his thick head of hair.

'I don't exactly remember on the instant what we had a few words about. That red-nosed grocer, wasn't it, who sent you and Em orders for the Adelphi upper boxes? Confound his impudence, and his upper boxes, too!' he cried. 'It was only done to annoy me. It——'

'That'll do, Noll,' said Muriel, with severity; 'we have discussed that silly question before, with a bad language accompaniment, too.'

'I beg pardon—humbly. Yes, so we have. I am a fool. Don't mind me, Muriel, for mercy's sake!' he said. 'I have only come to-night to ask if—if we can't go on as we did before—you and I, who suit each other so nicely.'

'Why, we were always quarrelling.'

'All my fault—my confounded temper. I own it. Peccavi!'

'And you have come to-night to ask forgiveness?'

'Yes.'

'Why have you been so long making up your mind that you needed it?'

'Didn't I go to sea again—in a tiff?'

'After all your talk of setting up a business in the Lambeth Road.'

'I waited for you to ask forgiveness—and you didn't,' he said frankly.

The two looked at each other, and broke

into a merry peal of laughter, which rang out strangely in that house of shadows. Their hands were clasped and lips pressed, and there were happy tears in Muriel's eyes. Here was the old sweetheart back again, just as he had always been, with once more —perhaps for ever this time, and at all events for the next twenty-four hours— never a shadow between them. Melpomene gathered up her trailing black skirts and glided out of the room like an offended phantom, and Thalia danced noiselessly in the background and showered ethereal flowers and sprays of radiant blossoms on their heads. It had been a long, long difference, but the making of it up was very pleasant. The troubles of the Gladwells faded away from Muriel's mind into the mists beyond—very naturally, too, for what were the Gladwells to this bright little

woman from Kennington Lane ? She would not have known them twenty-four hours till 8.45 p.m., and Noll Toope she had known all her life, and loved the greater part of it, for all his jealous fits and his bad tempers which followed the fits. Well, jealousy as well as pity is akin to love, and the man who is never jealous—ah, fair reader, beware of him !

Before Oliver Toope went away that night —and Muriel dismissed him as speedily as she possibly could—all had been forgotten and forgiven, and the world was very bright again for this high-spirited couple. There was a great deal to say before the lovers parted, but we can close the door softly, steal out on tiptoe, and leave them to say it by themselves.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE PARADE.

Oliver Toope left Rossendale with a joyous heart. It was settled—it was all fair sailing ; he and Muriel Reeves understood each other once more, were once more engaged to be married. He passed through the front gate singing to himself, and went along the road towards the town with his head thrown back and his chest thrown out as proud as a peacock. The night had deepened, and the stars and the moon were shining. He had not got far from the house when his quick ears heard a door open, and he came at once

to a full stop. Muriel might have something more to say, a fresh injunction to deliver, another promise to extort from him, and he was only too happy to oblige her. Anything for another five minutes' chat with her before he kept his word and went away from Great Storn's Head next day. He stepped into the middle of the road, the better to take in the curve of the various villas clustered under the shadow of the Storn, and he knew that the door of Rossendale was open again by the light which streamed out across the grass plat.

'She has remembered something — she——'

He made two or three steps towards the house, then he came to a full stop. It was not Muriel who was standing at the gate, but a man's figure with a felt hat on his head—Mr. Gladwell doubtless, for the man

was smoking, and some sparks from his pipe were scurrying like fireflies across the darkness. Mr. Gladwell was making sure of his unwelcome visitor's departure.

Oliver went back to the footpath and sauntered on leisurely. Presently he lighted his own pipe, standing under a gas-lamp to do it, and then walked on in a loose-limbed, slouching fashion, which was peculiar to him when he was in no particular hurry. Coming suddenly to a full stop beneath the lamp, as he had done, he had heard footsteps behind him on the pathway, but they stopped almost as soon as he stopped. He looked behind him, and fancied that a man was standing in the shadow close by the trees which were growing above the fence of a villa some fifty paces from him, but he was not certain. It was very probable that Mr. Gladwell had set himself the task of watching him—was

anxious to make sure of his next step, or where he was lodging, or had some other reason for following him, which did not suggest itself to Oliver immediately. Mr. Gladwell was evidently a curious man, and had not a high opinion of Oliver Toope. Very well, just as Mr. Gladwell wished—it did not matter to him in the least—but he should be very glad when Muriel had got back to London, and was free of that objectionable post at Rossendale. To think that she had been obliged to leave home—to do 'something for herself'—since he and she had been foolish enough to have a few words about a grocer—a red-nosed grocer, too—who had had his eye on Muriel ever since he had met her at a picnic, and was a widower with one child and a business at Camberwell, which included wines and bottled beers, and had lately branched out into pears—Jersey

pears, five for a shilling. Confound the fellow's impudence, to think that he was good enough for Muriel just because he had a shop of his own, and was doing well in it! Muriel, the little lady, the beauty of Kennington Lane, the cleverest of a clever family, that had not been clever enough, however, to keep its head above water. Muriel, who —but, he thought suddenly again, for what reason upon earth was Muriel's master *pro tem.* following him about as though he were a thief?

He was sure now that he was being followed by Mr. Gladwell; he had looked back and caught the side-face under the light of a street-lamp the gentleman was passing, and it was the good-looking, sullen face of the man who could not take care of his own tobacco-pouch for five minutes. What the—— And then Oliver Toope's thoughts

were disturbed and diverted into a fresh channel by the appearance of Claude Faremouth at his side.

'Halloa, Claude! where have you sprung from?'

'I have been waiting for you here.'

'Here' was the parade, which Oliver Toope had reached at last, and where Claude Faremouth, whom he had utterly forgotten for the nonce, was lying in ambush for him —a parade with a great many stragglers upon it this hot summer evening, for the night was fine, the moon was bright, the pier concert was still going on in the pavilion, where the electric lights were flaring forth, and there were the voices of a band of street singers further along the road.

'I thought you were going to have a long rest before we resumed our journey to-morrow?'

'I can't rest, Oliver. I try, but there is no rest for me. You know that,' the man said fretfully.

'I don't know why you can't rest, Faremouth,' said Oliver, 'for you do not make me your father confessor—or brother confessor,' he corrected.

'Oliver, you are very welcome to know everything, if you will not laugh at me afterwards.'

'I cannot promise; I have a bad habit of laughing. Besides, as I can't be of any assistance, as you have already told me, I don't want to hear of your troubles. I have had such a lot of my own, Claude.'

'Have any of them been dispersed to-night?'

'By Jove, they have!'

'I congratulate you—I am glad,' and the two men shook hands as if they had met

each other for the first time that day—an action which very much puzzled Mr. Gladwell, lurking in the background, and determined to discover, if possible, in what part of the town Mr. Toope and his friend were located. What were the men shaking hands for? What new compact had been ratified by it? What scheme resolved upon? People do not suddenly begin shaking hands without a bargain has been struck, a promise made or fulfilled, a wager laid even. And Mr. Gladwell, being a distrustful man, thought the action boded no good to the house of Rossendale.

And it was only Claude Faremouth 'wishing joy' to Oliver Toope.

'Thank you, old man,' said Oliver to his impulsive friend. 'I hope I shall have to congratulate you in a similar fashion soon.'

Claude shook his head sadly.

'She will never come back to me, Oliver. It is all hopeless.'

'Just as I have thought before to-day; but you see we have "pushed dem clouds away," as the nigger says.'

'She is very beautiful,' said Claude thoughtfully.

'Who is? Your girl, or mine?'

'Miss Reeves—to whom you introduced me to-night.'

'Ah! is not she?' exclaimed Oliver. 'By George! there isn't such another young woman in the whole world, Claude. And so bright and sparkling! And with such a keen sense of humour, too, and as straight as a die. To think my Muriel should stay with those Gladwells another hour—to be at their beck and call—to have to put up—oh, by the way, where's the beggar got to?'

'What beggar?' said Claude, bewildered.

'He's following me. He does not like the look of me, and he wants to be sure which way I am going home,' replied Oliver.

'That is an impertinent proceeding.'

'It is,' said Oliver; 'but I do not want to disturb his serene highness again. Muriel is in his house, and he is courteous enough to her, she says. He is only a trifle curious. Let the gentleman watch on,' he added, shrugging his shoulders, 'our withers are unwrung.'

'What is the name—Gladwell?'

'Yes. Dou you know anyone of that name?'

'No,' replied Claude.

'Ah! you're lucky,' said Oliver.

'I don't know how it is—but I should

like to see this Gladwell, for all that,' said Claude.

'Any reason?'

'Not any—that is reasonable,' was the reply.

'All right. We will wheel round—sharp—and come face to face with him, just for the fun of the thing. I feel full of fun to-night, Claude.'

'Yes. You are more like your old self than you have been for the last ten months.'

'Ah! but they have been ten months without Muriel.'

'And ten months with me,' added Claude dryly. 'But there, if I have depressed you—weighed you down by my own morbid thoughts—you have been a Godsend to me, and a true friend. Will you accept my gratitude by way of consolation for the affliction of my presence?'

'It is no affliction, stupid.'

'Thank you for saying that.'

'For calling you a stupid?'

Claude gave a sickly smile, then held out his hand.

'The only one who has ever borne with me—the only friend I have ever had.'

'Oh, bosh!' but Oliver took his hand and wrung it in his own.

'What the deuce are those two men continually shaking hands about?' muttered Mr. Gladwell in the far distance. 'What—oh, confusion!'

The men had suddenly turned, and were coming sharply in his direction. Mr. Gladwell, taken off his guard, could only think of running across the road and disappearing down a dark street opposite.

Oliver burst out laughing at the manœuvre,

turned again with his companion, and said, as they resumed their walk along the parade :

'Why, the man is as restless as you are, Claude.'

'I hope not, for the same reason,' said the other. 'If so, I pity him.'

'And the reason is——'

'No peace of mind.'

'Which passeth all understanding. Come along, old death's-head and cross-bones. If you can't rest I'll give you something to do.'

'What is that?'

'We will sail away home to Llanwyss-andar ; it's a fine night, and I promised Muriel to clear out of the town.'

'Clear out of the town—where she is?' said Claude, amazed.

'So that I shall not clash with that

fellow sneaking behind us somewhere again. Why should we wait till the morning when we cannot rest?'

'I am with you. Yes, let us start.'

A quarter of an hour afterwards the two friends were putting out to sea in their sailing boat, and James Gladwell, looking on from the distant parade, saw that it was not practical to follow them further.

'If they get drowned to-night, how glad I shall be!' was his amiable observation as he sauntered back towards Rossendale.

CHAPTER XI.

AT A LATE HOUR.

Mrs. Gladwell did not sit up for the return of her husband, although she had grown anxious as to his whereabouts.

'He is not generally so late as this—indeed, he seldom goes out after dinner at all,' said Mrs. Gladwell; 'but it has been an exciting day. I shall be glad to rest.'

She was in her room when she said this, with her maid and Muriel both in attendance. Mrs. Faremouth had been inspected in a perfunctory manner, and one of the maids told off to see that the silent lady was safely

in bed for the night, and now Muriel had to be dismissed, and the long day to close for her. What a day it had been!—full of changes and surprises, of doubts and difficulties, of storm and sunshine, with the sunshine left last in her heart.

'Good-night, Miss Reeves,' said Mrs. Gladwell; but when Muriel had returned the good-night and reached the door, she called to her again. Muriel returned to her side, and looked down into the wistful, upturned eyes.

'I have not been kind to you to-day, but the day has been exceptional, and I,' raising her shoulders, 'am so easily disturbed. I am not quite the—the dragon that you think me. Forgive me if I have been very unjust, Miss Reeves. Good-night.'

Muriel left the room with a higher opinion of her mistress than she had expected to

have before the night was over. Mrs. Gladwell's new gentleness, her implied regret at all that had occurred, disarmed Muriel completely, and the little plans for resistance and retreat were routed by the new manner of her mistress. For how long the new manner would last she did not know; she had little faith in its continuance. Well, sufficient for the day was the evil thereof—let her shut herself in with better and brighter thoughts, born of the coming of Oliver Toope upon the scene of action.

Muriel thought that she would write to Oliver Toope before she went to bed. Lovers always fly to epistolary correspondence when their hearts are overfull, even if the lover has hardly quitted the house. She was not going to see Oliver Toope for some time, and there were a few fresh matters to consider, to dwell upon, now that

there was time to cool down. Oliver was living for a while at Llanwyssandar, a village by the sea, between the green hills, known only to a few folk with large families and to the fishermen and fisher wives, who let apartments in their primitive cottages and spoke very little English. Here a week or so ago had Oliver Toope and his friend settled down for a while, content with their surroundings and their sailing boat, and spending the greater part of their time upon the sea. They had spent a clear day yesterday at Great Storn's Head, and more had come of that expedition than they recked of at the present hour.

Muriel wrote a long letter; she was in the mood for much counsel and affection, and there had been a great deal of talk concerning their future together which required some supplementary notes, now that the

engineer was not at her side to argue various points with her—to subdue her with his masterful way. The epistle being finished, there was a letter to the mother to write, and another to Em, to surprise them both with the news that Oliver Toope had again 'come to life,' and by the time her correspondence was completed, the hour was certainly late—not a sample of country hours in any way. Looking at her little gold watch, which she had placed upon the mantelpiece, she found to her surprise that it was past twelve o'clock, and that she had begun another day at Great Storn's Head.

Mr. Gladwell had come in; she had heard him ascend the stairs and enter his wife's room, which was under her own, and faced Mrs. Faremouth's room on the other side of the broad landing-place on the first floor. She could hear his voice for a time

in deep sepulchral monotones, and Mrs. Gladwell's replies in a minor key—once raised shrilly and only once, almost as if in vituperation—then all was still in the house.

The moon was bright, and the look across the arm of the sea to the mountains beyond was a fair picture beneath its rays. The sea was a flood of rippling silver, and the great hills were sullen and black by contrast. Somewhere in a rock amongst those shadows nestled the fishing village of Llanwyssandar, where Oliver Toope and his friend would be to-morrow. There was a consolation in thinking that Oliver was not so very far away after all—and yet four-and-twenty hours ago she thought that he was in the United States, had learned to forget her, most likely had married someone who she had hoped spitefully would 'pay him out'

for all his nasty tempers, his desertion of her just because he could not have all his own way. And here he was—or rather there he was amongst the mountains over the bay, across that flood of silver where was one dark moving spot, suggestive of a fishing smack, she thought, making with its cargo for Llanwyssandar—and it was her lover's boat reaching its home, if she had only known.

It was pleasant and restful to stand by the window and look out at Wild Wales steeped in the moonlight—to feel that the day's troubles were over and that to-morrow she hoped would begin with a better understanding of everybody. She wondered in a desultory fashion why she was not more tired—even why she did not undress and go to bed. She had not locked her door yet, she suddenly remembered, and it would be as

well in a house like this—a houseful of people who did not wear their hearts upon their sleeves—to turn the key upon them till morning. She moved from the window, becoming suddenly conscious that her candle had burned low and was flickering ominously. There would hardly be time for her to get across the room before the light would go out, she thought, although there was sufficient moonlight to find her way to bed by, if she did not draw down the window-blind.

She moved towards her door and then came to a full stop, with one hand to her throat, where was suddenly a nasty choking sensation. Someone was coming upstairs towards her room—had just reached the topmost stair even; there was a stealthy tread—a cat-like tread—and although it might be a servant passing up to the rooms

above—rooms in the big gabled roof—the sound was strange at that late hour. She quickened her pace towards the door, but it was too late. The door was pushed slowly inwards, and a tall figure in a long white dressing-gown — awfully ghost-like with the moonlight on it—stood in the doorway.

'Who are you? What do you want?' cried Muriel, alarmed now in real earnest.

'Hush! Don't make a noise. I want to speak to you,' said young Mrs. Faremouth, advancing softly into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

'TELL CLAUDE.'

As the tall, fragile figure of Mrs. Faremouth came into the room, Muriel backed slowly from her. It was a creepy sensation to find that the woman downstairs had enwrapped herself in a ghostly white flannel gown, and ascended to the room on the next floor to hold converse with its occupant in the middle of night—to talk to her, Muriel: and the poor young lady would not say a word in the afternoon, would not answer a civil question —had not been known to speak for years, she had understood the Gladwells to say.

What did it mean? Was the woman playing a part, too? Was she not really mad?—or was she even more mad than even the Gladwells knew? Mr. Gladwell had said before dinner that young Mrs. Faremouth might at times be dangerous, and that he had waited on the landing-place to be of assistance to his wife's companion, if it were necessary. Was there any danger now in this unlooked-for visit? God forbid, thought Muriel very fervently.

Mrs. Faremouth, upon her entrance, had not attempted to close the door behind her, and Muriel was glad to see a streak of light from the gas on the landing-place falling upon the wall of her room in quite a friendly fashion.

Mrs. Faremouth saw this, too, after she had spoken to Muriel in that low, excited way we have indicated in our last chapter,

for she stepped back suddenly and shut the door.

Muriel's heart sank a little more, and at the same instant the candle gave an expiring splutter and went out. There was nothing left but a room in deep shadow, flecked here and there by moonlight. The tall, white figure was not pleasant to confront under these conditions, and Muriel was half disposed to treat herself to a good, smart, healthy scream and thus disturb the Gladwells in their turn, and bring them out of their first sleep to her rescue. She restrained the impulse, postponed it for a while, but she did not relish the position.

She had seen something like this when she was a child, in a piece called the 'Castle Spectre,' and had dreamed of it afterwards for many girlish years. And here it was

now in reality, or a something so very much like it that it was difficult to detect the difference.

'Come to the window where I can see you,' Mrs. Faremouth whispered. 'I want to watch your face while I ask you a few questions—if you don't mind. If you will bear with me,' she pleaded.

'Why do you want to watch me?'

'To see if I can trust you—to make quite sure.'

'Very well,' said Muriel, in reluctant assent.

She had always read in books that it was necessary to humour mad folk—to let them have it all their own way; to say or do nothing that would excite them; and Muriel accompanied her to the window. At the worst she could break the glass and shriek for help, and the servants above or the

Gladwells beneath would quickly hear her, she hoped. But compliance with Mrs. Faremouth's wishes might save any strong measure of this kind, and prompt Muriel more clearly how to act.

It was not a nice position to occupy between twelve and one of the early morning—the 'dead of night,' it might be called—and she regretted deeply that she had not locked herself in before settling down to her desk.

Mrs. Faremouth put her hand upon Muriel's wrist, and approached her own sad—awfully sad—face so close to hers that Muriel's blood ran very cold in her veins. Muriel tried hard again not to scream, and succeeded with difficulty in the effort.

There was a long steady stare from eyes that did not flinch beneath Muriel's close scrutiny into them, and then Mrs. Faremouth said :

'Yes, I can trust you. I—I hope I can,' she added less confidently, the moment afterwards, and with a heavy sigh.

'What do you want with me?' asked Muriel.

'Hush! Speak lower — my sister and her husband are both light sleepers, and they will hear us. I am not strong. May I sit down?'

'Certainly.'

Mrs. Faremouth relinquished her grasp of Muriel's wrist, and sat down in a chair that was by the window. Muriel remained standing at her side.

'I have been very mad—perhaps they have told you so already. For years it has been a dreadful dream to me of disaster and confusion—life has been bereft of all hope —I have been very mad, I own it. I have been shut in with awful thoughts—but of

late days I have been coming back out of the darkness to a consciousness of passing things, of what is happening around me, of what is going to happen! I seem to understand——' she whispered eagerly, 'I do understand. God has been very good to me. I thank Him with all my soul. I am not mad now. I am getting well—getting well very fast. I am, indeed.'

Muriel was not quite certain of the fact, but she did not venture to express a doubt. Certainly there was a great change in Mrs. Faremouth — a wonderful change, if the Gladwells' statement were to be believed.

'In what way can I be of service to you?' Muriel asked.

'You can enlighten me on many things; on one thing more than any other. You can!' was the quick reply.

'Well?'

'Doubtless you may have heard that my husband is dead. They have told people so for years—for more years, good God, than I am able to count. It was the memory of his awful death which turned my brain. I remember it all now—so I must be getting better, stronger,' she ran on in the same eager whisper. 'I must be coming back to my old self. And he is alive—in this house somewhere, isn't he? For the love of Heaven, tell an unhappy, desolate wife the whole truth of it? You know!'

'Alas, Mrs. Faremouth, I know so very little.'

'You are in the secret. You have been sent by him to break the news to me. Don't tell me that you have not, or I shall die,' she implored. 'Oh, I want a friend so much—so very, very much!'

'Your sister——'

'Not now—not my friend now, I am afraid. But my husband—tell me all about him,' she urged. 'How is it that I have thought him dead all this long dreadful time, and yet that I have seen him to-night, as surely as there is a God in heaven? Has he come out of his grave? Explain that to me, do!'

Muriel was bewildered. Some inkling of the truth had been already in her mind, but it had been set aside for future consideration.

'Where did you think you saw your husband?'

'Going out of this very house to-night; just before it was getting dark,' was the whispered answer. 'He looked up at the windows, but he did not see me; and he went down that way—towards the town.'

'Is he called Claude?'

'Yes—yes ; that is his name. How did you——'

'A Mr. Claude Faremouth came with his friend, Mr. Toope, who is an intimate friend of mine, this evening to the house. He only stayed a few moments.'

'He will come again ; he will fetch me away from this awful place. He has not abandoned me. He will save me, will he not?'

'If he is your husband, I am sure he will come again, madam.'

'He must be Claude—my Claude. What doubt is there of it now ?'

'I hope he is,' said Muriel. 'I—I think he is. And I will help you very willingly.'

'God bless you.'

The young woman leaned suddenly forward, and kissed Muriel's hand.

'This Mr. Faremouth comes from America,' explained Muriel.

'Yes, it is he. My Claude was born in the States. I was in the States until they told me he was dead; he is an American. I am an American, and Lavinia, and the man she married, and who calls himself Gladwell now—we are all Americans.'

'Is not Gladwell his name?' asked Muriel wonderingly.

'No—no. Nor my sister's. What does that mean?'

'Heaven knows, madam,' was the reply. 'I don't.'

'I do not know, but I do not think I care now that my Claude's alive. They will let me see him—they do not bear me any ill-will. There can be no possible object in keeping him from me just because I have been mad. They would not be so unjust, so cruel, as that.'

'Do they know your husband is alive?'

'I have been so long in the dark I cannot tell. Claude has not been here before, then?'

'He and Mr. Toope came over from the States a few weeks ago,' Muriel replied.

'Claude has come in search of me, and God has given me back my mind, my senses, so that I shall be strong enough to welcome him. I am so glad, so very, very glad!'

Mrs. Faremouth shed some happy tears, and Muriel felt drawn towards her. Here was a young woman who had 'come back to herself,' from whom God had taken away the affliction and the burden, and brought back mental strength and almost sober reason in their place. The change had begun before the coming home of Claude Faremouth — the change from dull dead apathy to an interest in passing things, and the world, thought Muriel, for this poor

woman was probably to be a brighter place to the end of her days.

'I feel glad, along with you, Mrs. Faremouth,' said Muriel in response to the last words which had escaped her.

'Will you tell me your name, young lady?'

'Muriel Reeves.'

'I will remember it in my prayers,' she said. 'For all my prayers came back to-night. It is so very different about me.'

Muriel could but repeat her congratulations.

'They will be pleased, too, that I am recovering—I think,' said Mrs. Faremouth thoughtfully. 'I don't quite know if they will. I never cared for my sister's husband, never trusted him, never understood him—and Claude did not like him either. But Lavinia will rejoice—I am almost sure she

will. She has a good heart. She was always fond of me. But——'

She paused, and then went on again.

'But do not tell her that I came to you to ask about my husband—that I suspected there was a plot to keep him from me—that I believed that they knew where he was all along. I think, from what you have said to me to-night, that I have done them an injustice. Hence to-morrow, Muriel Reeves—that is to-day, is it not?—there will be rejoicing downstairs that I have come back to life.'

'Yes, yes; surely so.'

'Don't tell them what I have said to you, or that I have been in your room like this. Leave it all to me.'

'I have no right to interfere, madam.'

'You will tell me where my Claude is? —for you know.'

Muriel walked to the mantelpiece, took down the letters, went to the door and opened it, so that she should be able to read one of the superscriptions.

'Myrtle Lodge, Llanwyssandar, North Wales,' she read.

'Thank you. Should I forget it, which is not likely, tell it me again to-morrow,' said Mrs. Faremouth, who had followed Muriel to the door, and gave her another fright by appearing thus suddenly at her elbow; 'and should I,' she added, dropping her voice, 'drift away again—my God!—back again to that awful void from which I have emerged as by a miracle to-night, tell Claude. Be my friend always. Tell Claude!'

She passed out of the room, after resting her hands affectionately on Muriel's shoulders, and went down the stairs noise-

lessly and swiftly. As she turned the angle of the stairs, the white, wan, but still lovely face looked up again at Muriel, who was watching her descent.

'Tell Claude! For God's sake, tell him!' she repeated, and the low hissing whisper welled up the staircase like a prayer. Then Mrs. Faremouth disappeared into her own room, and Muriel was left a chance of rest at last.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN AWKWARD MEETING.

Though Muriel Reeves went to bed late, she rose betimes in the morning. She had had a deep restful sleep till five, but at that early hour she was awake once more. She was very particularly wide-awake, and lay staring at the window-blind — which she had drawn down after Mrs. Faremouth's departure—and at the daylight behind it, feeling that it was quite impossible to attempt to go to sleep again. She was broad awake and staring, and all the thoughts of the preceding day came in battalions to her.

So much had happened in twenty-four hours, there seemed so much to happen in the next revolution of a troubled earth round a fiery-faced sun, that Muriel sat up in bed with her little white hands pressed to her temples —a child-like figure puzzling over a problematical sum.

Thoughts of Oliver, of the Gladwells, of the midnight visit of Mrs. Faremouth, and of all that Mrs. Faremouth had said to her, of more that she had implied—they were besetting her already and making her head ache.

Headache! Oh, if she were to have one of her old sick-headaches from which she used to suffer in that crowded London upon which she had turned her back! If she had to begin the day with it, and so early a day as this was, a day that was to trouble more than herself, and wherein her charge, Mrs.

Gladwell, might not be at her best! What if she got up and had a long walk before breakfast?

She was fond of long early walks, and they had kept her in health, and brushed away many a mental cobweb, many an old-time worry which had sprung from Oliver Toope's 'tiffs,' or the household cares of the little house in Kennington Lane. She would dress, and go out in the early morning, and have a long trudge over the great hills, if she could reach them in time, and her time, she took it for granted, was her own until Mrs. Gladwell came down to breakfast; she had a right to employ her own time in the way which she considered most satisfactory to herself. Besides, she craved for fresh air, for absence from the close, mysterious house of Rossendale, and for a good mile or two between it and her.

A long walk in the fresh air, over the hills, or along the seashore, perhaps a sea-bath if she had time, and she could return to the house by eight o'clock, refreshed in mind and body.

It was too early to ask permission, as she might have done had anyone been stirring in the house. She was not a servant ; she was, she thought, with a sudden smile that lighted up her face electrically, a young lady engaged to be married. The sunshine was very tempting ; there was a breeze, causing the grass to quiver and the leaves to rustle on tree and bush, and all the birds were singing bravely.

Before half-past five Muriel was proceeding cautiously downstairs towards the front door ; she did not wish to wake anybody in the house ; they might all be tired, having, like herself, had something out of the com-

mon way to distress them, and she did not wish to wake them from their sleep. There was even a fear upon her that someone might call to her, set an interdict upon her leaving the house, exercise the power of an arbitrary taskmaster or mistress, and say that she must keep to her room, that Mrs. Gladwell might require her services at an early hour, and that it was expected from the new companion that she should be invariably prepared for a summons to the presence of that peevish lady. But no one was astir, and Muriel passed the door of the Gladwells' rooms, and of Mrs. Faremouth's, and went downstairs to the hall unchecked and unobserved. To her surprise, she found the street-door open, and the sunshine and the morning breeze coming into the hall like welcome guests.

Muriel paused to consider this, and to

wonder what it might imply. They had not forgotten last night to lock up, for she remembered that she had heard bolts drawn and locks turned in various directions, the present street-door having been the noisiest over its fastenings. Mrs. Gladwell was too nervous a woman not to be particular concerning the house's security, Muriel was certain. Who had gone out, then, or who was coming in? Should she close the door or leave it as she had discovered it, before setting forth upon her pilgrimage? Had Mr. Gladwell gone out? She remembered Mr. Gladwell's going out early yesterday morning; possibly it was a habit of his. But did he leave the door open behind him? and were people at Great Storn's Head to be trusted so implicitly as this, honest as they might all be? If she shut the door behind her, she might shut out Mr. Glad-

well, or a servant, or someone. The door was left wide open intentionally, she presumed, and a hasty glance into the dining-room, and into the study where she had been allowed to receive Oliver Toope, assured her that there had been no thieves about. What to do with that open door was highly perplexing, vexatiously perplexing. A front-door certainly ought to be open or shut, and she did not know which was right in this instance, and could not make up her mind to act on her own judgment. Very likely it was one of the maid-servants, who had perhaps got up early to meet her lover on his way to his work, and she could not shut her out in the cold, and get her a month's notice, or instant dismissal and a month's wages. Mrs. Gladwell, if once roused, would not be particular about adopting either course. Yes, Muriel was

irritable at times. She stamped her foot, and said very angrily, 'Bother the door!' and then drew it softly to, leaving it ajar.

'It is open for a purpose, so it had better remain so,' was her verdict; but when she had gone a few steps she paused, went back, and looked at the door again. 'Oh, it is all right,' was her final decision, and then she went away in real earnest, and soon forgot that Rossendale was open to all comers at half-past five in the morning.

Muriel went from the town and the pier and the sea to begin with, turning in the reverse direction towards the heart of the country.

'I shall have it to myself,' she said, with that craving to be alone which comes to each of us in turn, and at odd times and seasons. 'I can think it all out so much better.'

Presently she found that she was on a

road that wound away from Great Storn's Head, and that by degrees she had left the town far away in the background. Branching from this road were numerous footpaths and sheep-tracks all tending towards a higher level, and one of these she followed, walking at a fair pace. She was wandering over close green turf and under the shadow of tall trees at last, with the air becoming purer and keener and stronger as she ascended to the higher ground, so that her skirts clung to her, her hair became rough, and there was a difficulty in keeping her hat on. There was mountain-land close upon her and, looking back, she could see Great Storn's Head frowning at her in all its rugged grandeur, with its modern, toy-like villas clustering upon its side, and on the right a mass of house-roofs and church-spires, significant of the sleeping town, and

beyond that the great sea, alive with crested waves. She was amongst the hills, above it all, and with the mountains beyond her, only a mile or two away, it seemed. If she went on and on she should come to them easily, she thought; but they lay further away than she dreamed, and, like human happiness and love unalloyed, there was no reaching them.

But the walk invigorated her, and brought the colour to her cheeks. She was away from the busy hum of men, beyond the common track, doubtful if she were not trespassing on private ground even. The highroad lay some hundreds of feet below her, and wound in and out amongst the hedgerows like a great white snake. There was a river meandering from the sea into the far country. She could trace its progress for miles, shining like silver in the

morning sun. Here were the ruins of a castle, not very far distant from her, and a railway bridge spanning the river; and mountain peering over mountain, green and purple and gray, which took sullen frowns to themselves when the sun went in, and were full of solemnity and power—haunts of the giants or homes of the gods.

Muriel had not the heart to turn back; she had reached the summit of the hill, which now began to dip downwards precipitately, and to have rough boulders and scarred ribs of rocks upon its sides, which rendered walking difficult. She stopped and looked at her watch. It was a quarter to seven. She had been away from Rossendale an hour; it would be close on eight o'clock before she returned home, perhaps later. Mrs. Gladwell would be angry and curious, and 'the man who called himself

Gladwell now,' as Mrs. Faremouth had oddly phrased it, would scowl at her across the breakfast-table, or smile at her meaningly and familiarly, which would be worse.

Yes, she must make haste back. She should not care to be questioned and cross-questioned as to her movements; her time was at her own disposal before eight in the morning, she considered, but she wished she was not so great a distance from Rossendale.

She turned to retrace her steps. There seemed to be a short cut round the dip of the hill and through quite a little forest of trees: it would lead her in the right direction and save the complete ascent of the hill, she thought. Ah, those short cuts over hill and mountain—how many travellers have they led into error!

Muriel lost her way under the trees.

She wandered amongst the bracken, the wild flowers, and the 'scrub,' and there did not seem any way to the open again, tried she never so hard to fight her way through. It had all seemed comparatively easy, but it was not, and when she had arrived at a piece of hill that dropped suddenly and perpendicularly some twenty feet down, she had to retrace her steps, and walk round the jagged edge to higher ground, before she was able to continue her descent.

Muriel could have shed a tear or two with vexation if she had been a crying girl, but she was not emotional. She had a will of her own—a strong will—but it seldom led her into extravagance of action. Oliver Toope, when particularly aggravating, used to disturb her equanimity in the old Kennington days, but as a rule she was

always self-composed and just as aggravating as he was. But these Welsh hills and dales and undergrowths were very unlike the delicious flatness of the parish of Kennington, where a person can see which way he is going for half a mile at a time.

Suddenly Muriel gave a start. There was a man lying full length upon the grass, under the shade of a huge bush, with his arms folded and his head upon his arms—a well-dressed man, whose figure did not seem wholly unfamiliar to her. A felt bowler hat had rolled a little distance from him down the hillside, and an ivory-handled walking-stick was within his hand's reach. Was the man ill, or in a reverie, or asleep? No, not asleep, for as she approached he scrambled into a sitting posture, and glanced up, all eyes, at Muriel.

It was James Gladwell, who had been

taking his ease on the hills, a wild-looking Gladwell, whom she had never seen before, with a torn collar and dishevelled hair, with bits of straw and grass in it *à la* Ophelia, and with eyes as bloodshot as a bull-dog's. He looked with intense surprise, almost consternation, at Muriel, and exclaimed :

'Miss Reeves—you !'

'Yes, it is I, Mr. Gladwell. I have——'

'You have been following me,' he interrupted angrily. 'Mrs. Gladwell has put you up to this plan with her fool's suspicions and insufferable jealousy. Great Heaven ! As if a man cannot take a walk in the early morning without being spied upon in this manner. If you had had any thought for me, Miss Reeves, you would have refused to lend yourself to anything so despicable. I have had enough of this

—by Heaven ! I have had enough of such a life as mine is altogether. I would as soon end it as not. I would indeed.'

Muriel Reeves did not interrupt him. She was far too astonished to take her own part, to assert indignantly that he had leaped hastily to conclusions, and had wrongfully misjudged her. She had not recovered her breath, and he, too, was panting like a dog. She had only strength to think, and her first thought was that Mr. James Gladwell was very drunk indeed.

She found her voice at last.

'I have not been following you, sir. You are the last person I expected to meet.'

'What are you doing up here, at this hour of the morning ?' he inquired peremptorily.

'I could not sleep. I thought that I would take a stroll before breakfast.'

'You had no right to leave the house,' he said rudely, and Muriel felt constrained to answer him in his own fashion.

'Pardon me, but I shall leave the house when it pleases me,' she said warmly, in reply. 'I am not in Wales to receive your orders, Mr. Gladwell, or to submit to the insolence of your dictation.'

He gave a little gasp of astonishment as he rose to his feet, knitted his brows, and then said more graciously:

'It is a strange walk to choose, Miss Reeves, at so early an hour. It is not a safe walk for a lady. The quarrymen are moving soon after five, will be crossing here at six, and they are very rough men, not a few of them.'

'I have not met anyone.'

'Ah, but you will, I say,' he answered, with a snap.

'It is nearly half-past seven.'

'What!'

Muriel did not repeat her information, for he dragged his own watch from his pocket, and looked down at it as at a basilisk.

'So late!' he muttered. 'I—I must have dropped off to sleep. Like yourself, Miss Muriel,' he said, with a sudden laugh that made Muriel jump back with surprise, as though he had fired a pistol at her, 'I am of a restless disposition.'

Muriel did not admire the grim effort of James Gladwell to give a facetious turn to the conversation; his irritable manner appeared to be, at this juncture, far more natural. Mr. Gladwell was vexed at being discovered on the hills, and had resented Muriel's appearance there, and set her down as a spy upon him. He was scarcely con-

vinced now, and still regarded Muriel askance.

'Mrs. Gladwell will make a story out of this meeting between us—a brand-new story altogether—a nice little romantic episode,' he said with another laugh, which did not scare Muriel this time. 'I wish you had not come in this direction.'

'I have lost my way,' replied Muriel, 'or I should have been back in Rossendale at half-past seven.'

'If you follow those white stones, down the hillside, you will soon get to the high-road,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Muriel, and started away at once.

She was glad to get free from him. She felt in her heart afraid of him, and of his new manner, which appeared to be so singularly unreal. That he did not offer

to accompany her on the homeward journey was another source of intense relief. She had begun already to dislike him, and to distrust him more than she disliked him.

James Gladwell watched her descent for a while, then stooped, picked up his hat and stick, and scrambled down the hill in hot haste, and in a different direction altogether.

'If I can only get home before her!' he cried.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. GLADWELL MAKES A SUGGESTION.

Muriel Reeves did not find her way home quite as readily as she thought that it was possible she might do. Either she had mistaken Mr. Gladwell's instructions or had again turned in a wrong direction, for, though she reached the level ground of the highroad without much difficulty, it was at a point that necessitated a considerable detour before she found herself in a direct line to Rossendale. She seemed to have even walked half round the hill before she finally reached the right track, and the suspicion that Mr.

Gladwell had sent her off in the wrong direction was not wholly removed from her mind. She could not see the motive for so mischievous a proceeding; it would be only adding to the complications at Rossendale, she thought, to delay her arrival, and she gave Mr. Gladwell the benefit of the doubt until she reached home—not afterwards. It was half-past eight o'clock when she was at her post at the breakfast-table, and Mr. Gladwell had been back more than half an hour. She found him sitting at the head of the table, serene and smiling, and very unlike the scared-looking individual whom she had seen last on the hills. Mrs. Gladwell was absent from the dining-room, and, as Muriel glanced towards the vacant chair, the master said, by way of explanation:

'Mrs. Gladwell is not very well this

morning, and will take her breakfast in her own room.'

'Can I be of any——' Muriel began, rising, when he hastily interrupted her.

'By no means, Miss Muriel, please,' he said. 'Pray resume your seat. After your long walk I am sure you require rest, and Mrs. Gladwell is not yet awake.'

'Indeed!' said Muriel, sitting down again.

'She did not sleep well in the earlier part of the night, despite her chloral, which she takes now with too painful regularity to please me, poor darling!' he said; 'but she is slumbering like a child now. It would be a great pity to disturb her.'

Muriel Reeves slightly inclined her head by way of assent, but made no comment on this piece of information. He had taken up her Christian name again—to which she

had already strongly objected—and that was a sign that his irritable or suspicious moods had retired into the background. He appeared to have completely set aside their sharp skirmish of words of an hour or so ago, and was the smiling, patronizing, half-familiar being of luncheon-time yesterday. No one could be more anxious to please, to set her at her ease, than was this suave gentleman; but Muriel was grave and 'stand-offish,' and very much on guard. It was not satisfactory to be breakfasting *tête-à-tête* with her employer; she would have been glad to wait until he had completed his repast, and felt that it had been carefully arranged that it should not be so. Mr. Gladwell was anxious to put himself on friendly terms with Muriel again, if possible.

He did not attempt to ignore the early morning altercation; rather, he dashed into

the subject before the maid in attendance had retired.

'I am afraid I was too severe with you this morning, Miss Muriel,' said he, almost apologetically; 'but, to tell you the truth, I was so completely astonished by your appearance at so great a distance from home —it struck me as so important that you should, in my absence, be at hand to be of service to Mrs. Gladwell—that I fear I was unnecessarily harsh. I hope you have forgiven me?'

'I have nothing to forgive, Mr. Gladwell,' replied Muriel. 'But it is an unpleasant reminiscence that I shall be glad to forget.'

'Ahem! Yes, exactly. After all, Miss Muriel, I spoke for your good. It is not safe, I assure you, at so early an hour, to be wandering over the hills,' he said. 'I have informed you already that the quarrymen

go to their work by short-cuts over the mountains, and they are not too refined a section of our little Welsh community.'

'I have heard a better account of them,' said Muriel. 'But need we pursue the subject further? I shall not go that way again.'

'I am glad to hear that.'

'You have no fear, Mr. Gladwell?' she asked.

'Oh, I am well known to them all—considered by them quite a jolly good fellow, if I may say it without appearing to be an egotist,' he replied, laughing. 'I understand them—they understand me, especially when I part with a shilling or two.'

Having delivered himself of this little speech, he went on with his breakfast. Suddenly he dashed into conversation again.

'You will find an early walk by the seashore less fatiguing—even more bracing. Pray believe that there will be no objection to your trips, if you are partial to early morning rambles, from either Mrs. Gladwell or myself. We do not wish you to consider us exacting—quite the contrary.'

Muriel bowed, but the bad impression which she had formed of Mr. Gladwell did not evaporate under his new manner. It was affected and false to a girl who was naturally shrewd; it had not the true ring in it; it was not calculated in any way to deceive her. James Gladwell did not know this; he was vain enough to think that he was impressive, and that he posed as a very fair specimen of the straightforward Englishman. He was at his ease in his own house; he was the master; he was eloquent and good-looking, and he had made the *amende*

honorable. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have stood too much upon their dignity to offer a word in extenuation of a rude speech or an ugly scowl or two, and he had certainly come out very strong in both.

But he failed to soften the heart of Muriel, who was not naturally obdurate either. She had learned to distrust him, and she did not dispense her smiles quite as freely as he did when the mood seized upon him to do so.

'It might be as well, Miss Muriel,' he said, after another long silence, during which he had regarded with great intentness his reflection in the silver coffee-pot, 'to say nothing of our meeting on the hills this morning to Mrs. Gladwell.'

'For what reason?' Muriel said quickly, and with a flush upon her cheeks that she was unable to repress.

'Mrs. Gladwell takes such strange views of things—is so easily disturbed, jumps quickly—I confess it—to such wrong conclusions, that it strikes me that it would be infinitely better to let this meeting be just as if,' he said, spreading out his hands, 'it never had been. Neither for my sake, nor for yours, but in kindly consideration for a woman who is far from well just now.'

'I have every consideration for Mrs. Gladwell, but I see no reason to make a secret of this.'

'No secret. Oh no, certainly not a secret!' he responded with alacrity.

'Neither do I see anything that can disturb Mrs. Gladwell by the simple statement that I met you by accident outside.'

'On the hills.'

'On the hills, as you say.'

Mr. Gladwell looked at himself in the

coffee-pot again, and frowned at his distorted image, but said no more.

Muriel was glad when he rose and said politely :

'If you will excuse me, Miss Reeves?'

'With pleasure,' said Muriel spontaneously, and not meaning to be satirical ; but he glanced askance at her as he moved towards the door. Muriel felt relieved when he had quitted the room.

'If I stopped here for any length of time,' she soliloquized, 'I think it would be a difficult task to keep from hating that man.'

About an hour and a half later, when Mrs. Gladwell came downstairs for the first time that day, equipped for her morning excursion in her bath-chair, it was soon apparent that her lord and husband had frustrated the recital of Muriel's little ad-

venture by proffering his version of the story.

What that might chance to be did not affect Muriel particularly; she was only anxious that there should be no secret between her and the gentleman who was standing in the sunshine at the outer gate smoking his briar, and waiting patiently to escort his wife to the pier.

Mrs. Gladwell was not so effusive as last night, not so gentle in her manner.

'A woman of many moods, and this not one of the best of them,' thought Muriel, as her mistress's face was turned towards her.

'Good-morning,' Mrs. Gladwell said coldly.

'Good-morning, madam. You have had a bad night, I am sorry to hear,' said Muriel. 'I hope you feel better now.'

'Heaven alone knows when I shall feel better,' was the sharp reply. 'I do not look for it too readily—it may never be my lot to find it. But I have slept heavily lately. James must have given me too much chloral, I think; I am drowsy still.'

'Do I accompany you this morning?' inquired Muriel.

'My husband always accompanies me in the morning. And I shall not require you to fetch me home to-day.'

'Very well, madam.'

'You must be very tired after your long walk,' she added, somewhat caustically.

'I can stand a great deal of fatigue,' said Muriel.

'Being young and strong. Happy woman!' was the reply. 'But you must not undertake these excursions without informing me the night before of your intention. I was

left alone for hours. I do not like that, and cannot bear it.'

'I was not aware Mr. Gladwell was away.'

'Neither was I till I awoke half an hour ago. It is a new fad, this early rising of my husband's. I hope it will agree with him whilst it lasts,' she added thoughtfully; 'and I am sure it will not last long. He is not of one mind very long together, poor James!'

She said this more to herself than to Muriel, and looked thoughtful whilst she said it, closing her eyes for more undivided reflection possibly. Muriel thought that Mrs. Gladwell had dropped off to sleep again, but she had not. She rose to her feet suddenly, took Muriel's arm, and walked into the front garden where the bath-chair was waiting, and Mr. Gladwell.

Muriel watched husband and wife depart,

and was glad when they had gone, which was not a nice feeling to have lurking in the recesses of her heart. But this was only a passing experience—it would soon be all over and done with.

'I shall be glad to get away,' she murmured, as a young woman restless and dissatisfied might have done.

The coming of Oliver Toope had evidently given a considerable turn to her thoughts.

CHAPTER XV.

SUSPICIONS.

It was almost a 'day off' to Muriel Reeves. Her services were not in requisition, and she might have considered—had she cared to do so—that it was rather an easy time of it that was foreshadowed. Mrs. Gladwell came back to luncheon, and went out immediately afterwards in her bath-chair and with the same attendance. Mr. Gladwell was amiable and cheerful, and painstaking; and if it had been the settled intention of Mrs. Gladwell to keep her husband to herself that day the result was a complete

success. James Gladwell wheeled his wife to and fro with a complacent, if somewhat set, smile on his countenance, and pointed out the attractions of the hour—there were not too many of them ; and he was anxious about the sea-breeze—there was a breeze that day—not visiting her too roughly. He was solicitous also concerning a feather boa's fitting neatly and closely round his wife's thin throat, and he was altogether more of the model husband on parade than was even customary with him—which was saying a great deal. Muriel did not stir from the house. Once she went upstairs to Mrs. Faremouth's room, but the door was secured on the inside, and the lady declined to regard the two little knocks which Muriel gave on the panels without. Had the silent fit come back, shadowing the mind which was struggling faintly for supremacy again ?

And why had Mrs. Faremouth locked her door? Muriel remembered that there had been, very properly, no key to the lock when she had entered the room yesterday afternoon.

Nothing out of the ordinary way occurred till after dinner, when the dessert was on the table, and Mr. and Mrs. Gladwell, with Muriel, were together. Then the door opened, and Mrs. Faremouth entered, 'clothed and in her right mind.'

'Leave me to tell my story my own way,' she had said to Muriel Reeves, and Muriel had maintained a rigid silence accordingly, although she had had a few scruples as to the wisdom of the proceeding. But, then, for another unaccountable reason she had more faith in this mind-worn lady than in those who were in charge of her. Strange was it that Mrs. Faremouth was

the only inmate of Rossendale whom Muriel felt that she could trust.

James Gladwell looked up as the door opened, sat back in his chair, and waited for the further revelation of the story. Muriel, who had glanced at him instinctively, felt that he was not so completely surprised as he had been last evening at an event not one half so remarkable as this. Yes, she had 'caught it.' She was as suspicious as the rest of them in that unlucky house—for it crossed her mind that James Gladwell was only trying hard to look astonished. Had he been prepared for this—plotted for this little surprise—he would have looked like that.

Mrs. Gladwell was not prepared, or she acted better. She sprang to her feet, ran into a corner of the room as if afraid, then her strength failed her, and she

tottered back to her chair with a white face and quivering lips, and burst into tears.

'Gertrude!' she exclaimed, 'what—what is the matter?'

'I have come back to the world again,' was Mrs. Faremouth's reply; 'don't be afraid of me, Lavinia. God has been very good to me, as I told Miss Reeves yesterday.'

'Yesterday! Then my sister did speak to you, Miss Reeves, when you went to her room?' exclaimed Mrs. Gladwell through her sobs.

Muriel shook her head, but left Mrs. Faremouth to explain the second meeting between them; but that eccentric lady did not condescend to exonerate our heroine from the charge of duplicity. Muriel did not wish to take part in the discussion—there would come a time for explanation

presently, she thought, recking not of the rush of events that was to sweep it away. She would have been glad to escape, and, indeed, she half rose with that intention, when Mrs. Faremouth said hurriedly :

'Don't go. I wish you to stay.'

James Gladwell moved uneasily at her remark, and his wife dried her tears and looked hard at Muriel.

'I wish Miss Reeves to remain for a while,' said Mrs. Faremouth.

'My dear Gertrude, I think Miss Reeves is acting very wisely in offering to withdraw. This is purely a family affair,' remarked James Gladwell.

'I wish her to stay,' Gertrude Faremouth said, almost peremptorily ; 'for your sake and my sister's.'

'For our sakes?' her brother-in-law said, elevating his eyebrows.

'Yes,' she replied; 'so that she may not receive a false impression of what is happening around us. So that she may not think I have been acting a part, or that you two have been treating me unkindly.'

'Oh, Miss Reeves will not think so badly of us as that,' James Gladwell said, with a laugh, as at a something very preposterous, but it was evident he was relieved in mind by his sister-in-law's statement.

Mrs. Gladwell continued to regard her sister with amazement. Had Mrs. Faremouth risen from the dead, Mrs. Gladwell would have worn the same expression of fear and wonderment commingled; it was to her so great a mystery—a woman coming back unto herself out of the dark, and into the old strange world—after all the long years, and the prophecies of experts that the woman could get no better, that it

was physically impossible, and that the mind of Gertrude Faremouth must for ever remain an utter blank. And here she was almost as young and fair as ever, with the old, steady, searching gaze that Lavinia had known before to-day; and with the light of life—which is of reason when it burns steadily—upon her countenance. In very truth a miracle, all this; what was the cause of it? whispered Mrs. Gladwell to herself. What was to become of them?

Mrs. Faremouth continued. She spoke gravely and calmly; there was an entire absence of the nervousness which Muriel had remarked during the visit to her last night. Mrs. Faremouth was judicial by contrast. Muriel could scarcely reconcile this self-possessed young woman with the excited being who had stolen to her room only a few hours ago. But Mrs. Fare-

mouth's next words seemed to throw a light upon the situation.

'Miss Reeves has relieved my mind suddenly from a great weight—one supreme delusion,' she said, 'which has weighed me down so long. You know, both of you. Possibly it has been part of my madness from which no words of yours could cure me—only that young lady's there. I am deeply grateful—it is God's mercy that she should have stepped into the breach.'

Was Gertrude mad, after all—still mad? —thought the sister; and was this only a new phase of it? God forgive her, but she should be glad in her heart if it were so. She could not help that, knowing what would follow her younger sister's sanity.

'What has Miss Reeves done?' inquired the brother-in-law, very much interested now.

'She has proved to me that Claude is alive.'

Husband and wife looked at Muriel, then at each other. This Muriel Reeves was in the plot, then, and it was not mere chance that had brought her to Rossendale.

'I have thought Claude dead so long,' said Mrs. Faremouth, 'and that there was no hope for me in life after he had been snatched from me—that life was not worth praying for afterwards.'

'You are a friend of Claude Faremouth's,' said Mr. Gladwell, regarding Muriel very critically, 'and have not offered us a word in explanation.'

'I saw Mr. Faremouth for the first time last evening,' Muriel answered. 'For the first time I learned that he had been for years a friend of Mr. Toope's—that is the simple explanation, sir.'

'But you told Mrs. Faremouth that her husband was alive,' said Mrs. Gladwell breathlessly; 'when and where did the opportunity present itself for you to impart that information?'

'I saw my husband leave the house last night,' said Mrs. Faremouth, before Muriel could reply. 'I was thunderstruck, overwhelmed, perhaps, for an instant, more than I have ever been. But the shock was salvation to me—gave me my new strength. When the house was still—thinking that you and Lavinia might have been in a plot against me—I crept upstairs to Miss Reeves's room to seek advice, even protection, if it were necessary. And hers was only a simple truth that made all things—I hope and pray it has—very clear to me at last. God be praised for it, Lavinia! Oh! James, shall we pray?'

No, not quite sane, thought Mr. Gladwell, to propose prayer at so inopportune a moment. People who prayed at odd times and seasons were never quite sane, was Mr. Gladwell's firm conviction. He had tried the experiment himself once or twice in certain crises of his career, but it had never answered satisfactorily.

'I—I don't think we will disturb Providence with any prayers at present, Gertrude. The girl will clear away the dessert in a minute or two, and she would be so very much in the way. Don't you think so, fairy?'

Fairy! Mrs. Faremouth started. It was the old title by which Gladwell and his wife used to address her in the old days, before the trouble came, as if in pleasant mimicry of Claude, who had so suddenly passed away from her.

And that had not been explained either.

Why had Claude kept away from her all this weary time, when his return to her might have wrought the miracle of her return to sanity years earlier than this? Oh, the dark waste of the purposeless years!

'There is so much to ask,' Gertrude Faremouth said, betraying a little bewilderment for the first time, and looking from one to the other as if for moral and material support. 'When—when did you know of Claude's safety—you two?'

She had turned to her sister at last, but it was the husband who replied, with no small alacrity.

'Yesterday, for the first time, I thought it was possible,' he said. 'It was on the sands that I saw someone like Claude step from the boat with Mr. Toope.'

'Did he—but I shall see him soon—in a few hours. He can best explain. God

bless him! God bless him!' she repeated. 'And he's coming back to me.'

'God bless us! yes,' said Mr. Gladwell, a little dismally.

'He will come to-night, I hope,' she murmured.

'Yes, it is more than possible,' said Mr. Gladwell.

'Does he know that his wife is alive, within a few miles of him?' thought Muriel. It was scarcely probable that he did. But Muriel held her peace. She would not intrude upon the conversation if she could help it. There was time before her, she thought, hopefully still; it would all come right, like the finis to a pleasant story-book.

'Gertrude,' said Lavinia, suddenly and impulsively, 'my heart rejoices indeed to think that you are getting well and strong. I have so much to tell you—why we are

here, why we came from America, what the doctors advised, how my own health broke down ; oh, I have so much to say !'

'Ahem ! yes,' said Mr. Gladwell, with a cough. 'We have, indeed, a long story to relate to-morrow.'

'To-morrow ?' repeated Mrs. Faremouth.

'Yes ; let us begin the new life—together, all of us—with the new day,' said he, more cheerfully. 'You have been tried too much already, Gertrude. You must be very careful. You must not be excited further. Another night's rest before we relate our sad, eventful history. Nothing more to-night but peace for all of us ; and prayer, of course, later on,' he added, as a happy thought which he was sure would please his sister-in-law.

'Yes ; we must be grateful, and we must

show our gratitude,' said Mrs. Faremouth. 'I was a religious woman, was I not, before the affliction came to me? I am sure that I shall be so again.'

'I am sure you will,' said Lavinia confidently.

'I have been getting slowly well for the last week or two, I think, now,' said Mrs. Faremouth musingly. 'I have seemed to take interest in passing things, by fits and starts. I have grown curious and watchful, and there were times when all the past incidents seemed easy to recall.'

'You made no sign to us,' said Lavinia.

'I thought I would not, for awhile,' the younger sister replied; 'but the sight of Claude has scattered my poor plans.'

'Plans!' replied James Gladwell musingly.

'Yes; I confess that I did not trust you

both at first; it was wicked of me, but I could not help it,' she confessed.

James Gladwell considered also that it was uncommonly wicked of her to have had such thoughts as a start-off to her new career, but he simply shook his head by way of mild reproof.

His thoughts even turned in a new direction, for he said suddenly:

'Miss Muriel, you are looking dreadfully tired.'

'I am not tired, but the room is very hot,' said Muriel.

'Family matters — ours, of which you know not anything—cannot really interest you,' said Lavinia. 'Perhaps Mrs. Faremouth will excuse you now?'

Gertrude Faremouth looked across at Muriel quickly, even with a sudden sense of alarm shining from the depths of her great

blue eyes, Muriel thought a little later on; but she answered:

'No, no; don't let me detain you, Miss Reeves. You're looking faint; are you not well?'

'The room—is—hot,' said Muriel again; 'if I could get a breath of fresh air—for a short time—it would do me good.'

'Pray go for a little walk,' urged Mrs. Gladwell; 'you have not been out since breakfast.'

'No.'

'How inconsiderate of me, to be sure!' exclaimed the mistress; 'and I, who know the value of fresh air so well! Will you go out, or have a long rest in your own room?' she asked.

'I think I will go out for a little while,' said Muriel.

Mr. Gladwell did not offer any objection

or suggestion. He was sitting with folded arms, staring straight before him at the opposite wall. But as Muriel went out of the room she looked back at him instinctively, and his eyes were following her, and had a strange light in them, she fancied. Ah, she was full of fancies! The house was strange, strange people were in it, and she should grow strange with the rest of them, if she were not mindful of herself. Let her get into the open, and feel the sea-breeze upon her heated face, and be conscious of being free of Rossendale for half an hour, at least. The atmosphere was oppressive, the Gladwells and Mrs. Faremouth were more oppressive still, and she was glad to have leave of absence extended to her for awhile. Yes, she had been indoors too long. She was feeling faint, and she was growing a terribly suspicious

woman, which she had never been before she came to Wales.

Ten minutes later Muriel Reeves was clear of Rossendale, and making for the parade as fast as her feet could carry her. To see the sea, to feel the freshness and coldness of the sea-breeze upon her, was a craving for which she could hardly account. That she was alone, and unescorted, and pretty, did not occur to her; one of a large family, with a lover abroad, she had been left to herself a good deal, and grown confident accordingly. She was a young woman who knew how to take care of herself, self-reliant, and brave.

And she had had trust in her fellow-creatures—had never been in any way a suspicious girl until this hateful Rossendale submerged her. Did suspicion come upon a poor little body with such rapid strides? she

wondered—never taking into consideration that her own natural clear-sightedness had warned her that all was not fair sailing with the Gladwells and the young fair woman who had laid aside her madness like a cloak. Hers had been an every-day but not unhappy life until she had come to Great Storn's Head, and then, presto! here was she in the thick of romance and incident. Wonderful Wales, that had surrounded her with mystery, and brought Oliver Toope to her feet again, and all within four-and-twenty hours!

She would have been very happy now—thanks to thoughts of Oliver, especially—she would have smiled even at the mysteries, she thought, if she had not grown dreadfully distrustful.

That was the worst of it; that was a difficulty she could not readily surmount;

a question of nerves probably, but vexatious and a little irritating, or—grim thought this for a girl like Muriel—was there a foreknowledge of something to come, a shadow before, that oppressed her, gave extra throbs to her heart, filled her with a sudden sense of awe? Why should she have whispered in her ears again the two words she had listened to last night, and that had sounded like a wail of despair :

'*Tell Claude!*'

'I will go back to Rossendale!' she exclaimed in the impulse of her new fear; 'all is not well there, or safe. I am sure of it.'

END OF VOL. I.

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